

Sandra Swift and the Cyclone Gun

Prologue

Peter Klimt stepped out onto the loading dock and took in a slow, peaceful breath. To him, the hours immediately following sunset were the best part about working this particular shift. He enjoyed the taste and feel of the breeze coming in off the Baltic. Not only that, but the shipping coming in and out of the Warnow to the east was far enough away to only provide a few interesting lights in the distance. Much better than having the enormous hulks pushing by within inches of his nose, the way they did his cousin working at the docks in nearby Rostock. Klimt was one of those men who enjoyed the sea, but only if his feet could remain on dry land.

This evening, the sky was clear, and the breeze was fully to his liking. There were no outstanding job tickets awaiting his attention, and the phone hadn't rung once. Everything pointed to a peaceful shift, and Klimt was thoroughly happy with the situation.

He had exactly five minutes left to live.

The first indication of trouble was innocent enough; the ring of the phone which signaled a call from the front gate. Klimt frowned mildly as he went to attend to the call. No one had told him of a scheduled delivery, but they did occasionally arrive. Sometimes the shipping agents in Rostock had to deal with late imports, or a tangle at Customs meant something had been held up at the docks.

Oh well . . .

Klimt picked up the phone. "Ja?"

A load of static burst from the small speaker, forcing Klimt to hold the receiver back from his ear. But there was the faint indication of a voice on the other end, and Klimt tried speaking to it. "Marko! Was is falsch? Marko?"

The line suddenly went dead, and Klimt stared at the receiver for a moment before hanging up and trying to dial the gate directly. There hadn't been any trouble on the line so far, and Marko hadn't mentioned any problems during their meal break earlier.

It had sounded like Marko. Shouting something odd.

Almost as if he had been screaming zyklon.

Curious, Klimt hung up the phone and went back to the edge of the loading dock, peering through the darkness west towards the location of the front gate. It was almost a

mile away, at the far end of the warehouse complex, and normally not visible at this time of night, and also difficult to see from his current position.

Nothing which indicated trouble. No sirens or flashing lights.

But something odd was happening now. Klimt could hear a strange sound approaching from the west. A rushing sound. Rather like an approaching wave . . . or a freight train . . .

No sign of a train, though, on the nearby delivery tracks. And, from what he could see, the Baltic was smooth.

Frowning, Klimt turned and began walking back towards the phone. As he did his eyes automatically swept over the enormous metal doors which served as the loading dock entrance to the vault. Solid. Secure.

He almost reached the phone when something made him pause and turn back. Perhaps a feeling. Perhaps the sudden increase in the mysterious rushing sound. Whatever the reason, his eyes widened in shock, and his face prepared for an enormous scream.

It never happened. In the next instant, Peter Klimt was picked up and smashed to bits, killed instantly by the same force which struck the vault doors head on.

Chapter One: The Haunted Visitor.

"OK. One, two, three . . . kick! One, two, three . . . kick! One, two, three . . . kick! . . ."

Sandra Swift was working as hard as she could, concentrating, her entire body moving in what she hoped was the proper rhythm. Next to her, Phyllis Newton was equally exerting herself. Both young women were thoroughly engrossed in their efforts; Sandy's long, blonde hair bouncing up and about in contrast to Phyllis' own brunette locks.

Nearby, Bingo Winkler sat propped atop a corner of the desk in Sandy's office, staring at the activity before her. Smaller than the other two, her short blue-black hair framed an expression of calm concentration, one elbow on a raised leg and the hand supporting her chin as she appraised the goings-on.

"OK, stop," she finally said.

Sandra and Phyllis became still.

"Well?" Sandra asked.

Bingo shook her head. "Phyllis still kicks higher than you."

"Ach . . . she does not!"

"Hate to say it, Sandy, but she does. Phyllis gets her foot up to the level of her chin. You're just barely making it."

Phyllis stood there, smiling serenely.

"I am more flexible than Phyllis," Sandy declared. "I'm a test pilot. I exercise regularly. Stretching . . . conditioning . . ."

"Makes no difference, she's still got you beat."

"She's got slightly longer legs," Sandy pointed out. "Ask Tom. I bet he's noticed."

Phyllis had the good grace to blush slightly. "Let's not," she gently suggested.

"It's a matter of practice in certain things," Bingo said, slipping down off the desk. "Take me, for instance." Standing upright she suddenly executed a high kick. The toes of her left shoe neatly tapped against her forehead.

Watching her, both Sandy and Phyllis felt their jaws drop open.

"That---," Sandy began.

"---was painful to watch," Phyllis finished.

"And I'm shorter than the both of you," Bingo pointed out. "But, I guess if we're talkin' 'bout proportions, I actually got the longest legs here."

"Ask Ken," Phyllis added with a snicker.

This time it was Bingo who blushed. "Let's not."

"Wait a minute." Sandy held a hand up. "Hold on. I just got it figured out. I'm wearing more constrictive clothing than Phyl. These pants are too snug down here. If we both switch into gym suits . . ."

The intercom on Sandy`s desk suddenly buzzed.

"Oh, maybe that's Rip," she said, reaching over the desk to turn it on. "Yes?"

The speaker produced the voice of Miss Trent, the executive secretary for Swift Enterprises. "Sandy, we've got a bit of an emergency here."

"What's wrong?"

"Your father's scheduled appointment has arrived and, unfortunately, he's still busy with the space station problem."

"Oh dear." Sandy frowned. "Yeah. Did you want me to handle it until Dad's finished?"

"Please. Can I send him on over?"

"Go ahead, Sue."

"Thanks. He should be by shortly."

Switching off the intercom, Sandy raised her voice to shout into the outer office. "Lisa? Sue's sending Dad's appointment over here. Go ahead and clear him in. And let me know if that call from Hulse Aerospace comes through."

"OK, Sandy," her secretary called back.

Phyllis had produced a brush and was straightening out her hair. "Who's visiting your Dad?"

Sandy shrugged. "All I know is that Dad got a late call last night from the State Department. Some European big shot was supposed to come by and discuss something." Moving to the wide window in her office she peered out over the buildings of Swift Enterprises: the enormous scientific and engineering research complex which stretched along part of the western shore of Lake Carlopa on the outskirts of Shopton, New York.

Having just celebrated her twenty-first birthday, Sandra Swift was Enterprises senior test pilot. Phyllis Newton, slightly older, was not only Sandy's best friend, but was also an executive member of the public relations and marketing team at Enterprises. Belinda Winkler . . . more commonly known as "Bingo" . . . was officially hired as a cook for the Swift family, but unofficially followed the other two girls about as a welcome companion.

"There," Sandy said, pointing out towards the aircraft runway. A sleek business jet could be seen parked at one end.

Sandy was frowning at it. "Looks like a . . . Dassault Falcon. Maybe a 900. Hard to tell at this distance."

"Call the tower," Phyllis suggested.

"That'd be cheating," Sandy replied. "'Sides, whoever showed up in it is almost here anyway." She crossed her arms, exhaling noisily. "I hate slow work days."

"I'd have thought you'd be up flyin' around," Bingo pointed out.

"Normally yes. But Rip was supposed to call on when he was going to deliver the new Joey parasite plane, and he hasn't yet. Now my whole schedule's thrown off."

"Then perhaps I can help the situation," a voice remarked from the doorway.

Something in the voice triggered an old memory and Sandy quickly turned to see the visitor. Tall, immaculately dressed in a business suit, carrying a slender briefcase. He was well-built, broad-shouldered, his head topped with short, steel-grey hair and, at the moment, his features included a friendly smile.

Surprise and recognition draped not only over Sandy, but over Phyllis and Bingo as well.

"I'll be . . ." Sandy began.

"Me too!" Bingo added. "It's . . ."

"Herr Nospe!" Sandy exclaimed, quickly stepping across the room to greet the man.

Earhardt Nospe . . . European space scientist and business executive . . . smiled wider as he took Sandy's hand in his. "And so we meet again."

Recovering from the initial shock, Sandy felt her face copying the older man's smile, even as her insides continued to tumble in surprise. It had been almost a year since their last meeting. Then, Nospe was in charge of a German industrial facility in Ecuador, and both he and Sandy had been involved in an adventure dealing with not only the disappearance of Sandy's grandfather, but contact with an alien artifact.

"I had no idea you were the guest we were waiting for," Sandy said. "How're you doing?"

"Very well, thank you," Nospe replied, extending his hand. His eyes passed over Sandy's head to see the others approaching. "And the fräuleins Newton and Winkler." His eyes twinkled. "The old group, together again."

"Hopefully this'll be a lot more peaceful than last time."

"I share your hope," Nospe replied, his expression sobering a bit. "I'll know more after I've had an opportunity to discuss matters with your father." He was looking around the office. "And he is . . ."

"Oh! Sorry. There's been a problem up at our space station. One of our solar battery farms has suffered an orbital misalignment due to a premature firing of one of its station-keeping thrusters. Dad's currently supervising the realignment efforts from down here. It shouldn't take too long."

"Quite all right," Nospe graciously said. "In any case, I was hoping I'd be seeing you very soon. Thanks to you I have become several thousand Euros richer."

"Oh?"

Nospe nodded, a slightly malicious smile now appearing. "I won a considerable bet on the outcome of the `Photon's' test run."

"Oh!" Sandy found her face reddening slightly. Nospe was referring to Sandy's most recent exploit: a supersonic assault on the land speed record. "It . . . had its moments."

"Knowing you, I can well imagine. In any case, my congratulations to the World's Fastest Human. Is your brother bearing up well to the idea of his sister becoming as famous an adventurer?"

"You can ask him yourself very soon. He and Bud Barclay have finished escorting Challenger and the rest of the Neptune Initiative spaceships back into orbit, and they'll be returning to Earth sometime tomorrow."

Nospe was nodding. "Good . . . good."

"In the meantime, I guess we could go wait for Dad in the conference room." With a wave of her hand, Sandy guided Nospe out of her office. Behind them, Phyllis and Bingo fell into step.

"Your visit here was something of a surprise," Sandy pointed out as they walked down the corridor towards the conference room. "Dad didn't know about it until late last night, and I wasn't aware of anything except that we were expecting a sudden visitor from Europe."

"Yes," Nospe replied with a nod. "Officially, I'm here as a representative of the European Commissioner for External Relations. A sort of . . . problem . . . has developed and, after some discussion, it was felt that Swift Enterprises should perhaps be consulted."

"I'm sure Dad will be flattered. I know I am." Sandy looked up at Nospe. "What exactly is the problem?"

"Robberies, Sandy. Thefts."

Sandy glanced back at Phyllis and Bingo. "Must be pretty important thefts."

"Oh they are," Nospe agreed with a nod. "They are. But it's not so much what's being stolen as it is the nature of the thefts themselves. Walls are being shattered. Vault doors are being torn open."

"By what?"

"That is, admittedly, why I'd like very much to speak to your father. Apparently our mysterious thief . . . whoever or whatever it is . . . leaves behind no trace of its presence. A totally invisible force." Nospe paused to stare solemnly into the blue eyes of his companion. "Once again, Sandy, it seems as if you and I are chasing ghosts."

Chapter Two: Invisible Thieves.

Nospe, reading something in Sandy's expression, gave a rueful nod. "I know, I know . . ."

"I'm not immediately disbelieving you," Sandy replied, ignoring the small choking sounds from behind her. "But two things occur to me. First off, it's been my experience that, whenever I've encountered 'ghosts', they've always turned out to have a very human origin."

"Not recently," muttered Phyllis.

"As you well remember," Sandy continued to Nospe. "In the second place, I realize I might not be the world's foremost expert on paranormal phenomena, but I don't recall ever hearing of ghosts shattering walls or tearing open vaults."

Nospe nodded again. "True. But . . . perhaps we should meet with your father and you can hear the entire story."

"Good idea."

They continued on down the corridor, reaching the doors to the conference room at the same time another figure was walking briskly towards them from the opposite direction. The newcomer broke out into a smile. "Earhardt!"

"Tom! So good to see you again."

Sandy dropped back a bit as Nospe shook hands with her father. Tom Swift Senior was a man whose slender build had kept in shape through decades of getting his hands dirty in the mechanical ends of scientific work. The gold of his hair was now shot with grey, but his eyes were still as sharp and blue as those of his equally famous son and daughter. Seeing him and Nospe together put Sandy in mind of an idea for a painting: "Captains Of Industry".

"Mary just called me," Tom Sr. was explaining to the other man, "and said she and Tèa are getting together famously. As usual."

Nospe chuckled. "Excellent."

Opening the doors to the conference room, Tom Sr. ushered his friend in, with the girls following close behind. "I had no idea, Earhardt, that it was going to be you who was paying a visit, but I'm glad."

"As am I, Tom. And I had promised Tèa a holiday."

Something worrisome was tickling Sandy's mind, but it refused to immediately surface. Instead she asked, "I take it everything's fixed with the station?"

"Yes," her father replied, nodding. "It was touch and go there for a while. But the station crew managed to reboot the command programs for the thrusters and bring the solar farm back into its proper position."

"I didn't mean to come at a bad time, Tom---"

Tom Sr. waved aside Nospe's objection. "You didn't. Frankly I'm looking forward to helping out with whatever problem you have."

Nospe settled into a chair at the large circular table. "And, if you don't mind, I'd like it very much for Sandra and her friends to remain and also listen."

Sandy's father gave her a rather speculative grin. "Well," he commented, sitting down near Nospe, "admittedly there's a precedence involved."

Sandy returned the smile.

With everyone seated, Nospe now opened his briefcase and started removing papers. "You already know who was responsible for my coming here, Tom."

Tom Sr. nodded, his attention solemn now.

"Excuse me," Phyllis broke in. "But you're no longer working with Wintergruppe?"

"There's been some . . . problems," Nospe admitted slowly. "As you know, Wintergruppe was forced to pay an enormous fine after it was disclosed that, among other things, we had been using bootleg repelatrions."

He avoided looking at Sandy, who was trying to hide a slow blush. There had been a time when she and Nospe had been on opposite sides of several issues, but she was no longer proud of the role she had played in being a major cause of Wintergruppe's difficulties.

She now offered something in the way of an olive branch. "There were extenuating circumstances," she gently said.

Nospe gave her a grateful glance. "For that, Sandy, I thank you. But, as you so thoroughly pointed out back in Ecuador, mistakes were made, and prices had to be paid for them. For myself, whereas I'm no longer a key figure in Wintergruppe's western operations, I am still allowed a seat on the board of directors, albeit in an advisory capacity only." He shrugged. "Actually, I prefer the arrangement. It's enabled me to devote more time to scientific research."

"You're still with Section Omphalos?" Sandy was referring to a secret European organization involved with clandestinely studying the relationship the Swifts had with a race of extraterrestrials known as the "Space Friends".

Nospe's hands slowed in their work. "In a sense," he replied, "although that's another organization which has undergone some changes as a result of what happened in Ecuador. I am still very much involved, however, with Europe's extraterrestrial research efforts."

Sandy, feeling more and more like the Destroying Angel, decided to try and keep her mouth shut. Or at least keep it away from potentially embarrassing subjects.

"When this current . . . situation . . . arose, several governments within the European Union consulted with major industrial efforts to try and come up with some answers. It was felt that perhaps Swift Enterprises could be of assistance and, given my personal history . . ."

Sandy attempted to look as innocent as possible.

". . . I volunteered to act as go-between." Nospe now glanced over his shoulder at the large display screen on the wall. "That might work better than my own notes. Tom? Can you put up a map of Europe, bitte?"

"Certainly." Reaching for a nearby control panel, Tom Sr. began pressing buttons. Within moments a political map of Europe appeared on the screen.

Standing up, Nospe went to the map. "In the past few months," he explained to the others, "there have been a series of break-ins occurring throughout Europe. Mostly in Germany."

He began pointing to various places on the map. "It started at Lofer, in Austria. Then in Stuttgart. Then Waigandshain, Bremen, Aarbergen, Berlin, Rotterdam, Hamburg. Finally, three days ago, at Rostock." Nospe turned back to the others. "Warehouses. Research centers. Storage facilities.

"In each instance the story was the same. From out of nowhere, and completely unseen, some invisible force reached out and smashed through a wall or protective door. Several people have been killed. In each case their bodies had been pulped, as if they had been slammed against a stone wall."

Tom Sr. was frowning. "I remember seeing something in the news about the break-in at Rostock. I wasn't aware this was part of a chain of events."

Going back to his briefcase, Nospe picked up a photograph which he passed to Tom. "The warehouse at Rostock."

After studying the picture, Tom Sr. passed it to Sandy. Looking at it, her mouth slowly opened. "My God!"

"Those doors were one and one-quarter meters of solid steel," Nospe said, "and something tore them apart as if they were paper."

Sandy passed the picture on to Phyllis. "Did the targeted places have anything in common, Herr Nospe?" she asked.

Nospe slowly shook his head. "None that we've been able to determine as of yet, but we have several investigative agencies still looking."

"Was this just random destruction, Earhardt?" Tom Sr. asked.

"You'd mentioned something about robberies," Sandy added.

"Ja," replied Nospe, picking up one of the sheets he had removed from his briefcase and passing it over to Tom Sr. "Understand that, in many of the cases, the pieces are still being picked up and, therefore, we fall back on speculation. But these were the items which the targeted buildings held."

The elder Swift frowned at the list. "High-pressure turbine parts . . . cavity resonators . . . LC circuits . . . "

"Pardon?" asked Phyllis.

"An LC circuit is a resonator connected to a capacitor," Sandy explained. "It allows an electric current to alternate between the resonator and the capacitor at the resonant frequency of the circuit."

Phyllis and Bingo were staring at her.

"Well, you asked."

"These last items on the list," Tom asked Nospe. "Museum pieces?"

Nospe shrugged. "Two of the locations which were targeted were archives for the Deutsches Museum. Members of the Museum staff are still checking against the inventory to see what, if anything, was taken from the vault."

"Incredible." Tom Sr. looked over at his daughter. "Well?"

Sandy had recovered the picture of the smashed door and was looking at it again. "You say the thieves, or the source of whatever did this, have never visibly appeared?" she asked Nospe.

Nospe shook his head. "No indication of vehicles driving up to the buildings. Many of these places had protective fences, but none of them were breached. With one exception, nothing's shown up on any security cameras."

"An exception?" Tom Sr. asked sharply.

"Ja!". Nospe removed a compact disc from his briefcase. "From the security camera at the warehouse in Hamburg," he explained, passing it over. "It's not much, but see for yourself."

Taking the disc, Tom inserted it into a slot near the control panel. Everyone turned to look at the wall screen.

On the screen the image of Europe was suddenly replaced by a view of Chaos. Watching it, Sandy presumed she was supposed to be looking at the interior of a normal warehouse. A wide open floor lined with several dozen large metal shelves.

But everything was in motion. Pieces of machinery were flying around the room. The metal shelving was dancing and whirling about in the air, twisting themselves apart. There was no audio track with the images, and everyone watched as the mad scene played out in total silence.

It lasted for eight seconds before the screen went black.

"Good Lord honkus above!" breathed Bingo.

Sandy was inclined to agree with Bingo's reaction.

"The video camera recording the image was struck by something," Nospe explained, turning back to the others. "But you can see what I've been talking about. The same force you saw on the screen was responsible for smashing through the doors and walls."

Sandy sat back in her chair, turning her eyes to meet those of her father. She knew that, if she were her brother, it would only take a few minutes worth of exchanging equations or theories with Tom Sr. before a rational answer arrived.

She also knew she was exaggerating. But that's how it seemed to her sometimes.

"I have to admit I'm hooked," Sandy said. "I also wish I had an immediate explanation." Scratching idly at her cheek she turned back to Nospe. "Were there any instruments at any of the locations which recorded anything?" she asked him. "Any sort of sensors?"

Tom Sr. nodded, which caused a warm glow to spread through Sandy. "And I presume you've already taken the step of sending samples from the attacked areas to your laboratories for analysis," he added to Nospe.

"We have," Nospe replied. "So far, nothing. And no, Sandy, these events haven't happened within range of any sort of instruments which would provide useful data."

Sandy once again exchanged a look with her father. "I guess," she began slowly, "we could look at whatever data you've brought with you and apply our own methods."

"Absolutely," agreed Tom Sr.

Nospe appeared grateful. "That is what I was hoping for. Especially in view of the fact that, very recently, Swift Enterprises had also been attacked by an invisible force."

"Oho!" Sandy said.

Her father nodded. "Earhardt, that was due to a sophisticated cyborg who controlled enormous electromagnetic power."

Nospe's eyes narrowed. "Ja, we had heard some details about it. We were wondering . . ."

". . . and it's an attractive theory," Tom Sr. began.

"But Ithaca Foger disappeared into a quantum black hole during the 'Photon' run in Nevada," Sandy finished. "She's gone forever."

Beneath the table her fingers crossed. Unbeknownst to all concerned, the move was duplicated by both Phyllis and Bingo.

"Is it possible," Nospe asked, "that we could be facing a similar sort of technology here?"

Tom Sr. glanced at Sandy. "We could check with the State Department," he said, looking back at Nospe. "It was determined that the cyborg had been developed as part of a secret Kranjovian effort in league with the CEM/Anahuac group. If Kranjovia is behind this---"

"But there's no reason for them to be," Nospe insisted. He raised a hand. "Yes, I know that reason and Kranjovia seldom walk hand in hand. But why would they carry out such an attack? And how? And why these targets?"

Sandy kept quiet. She had never told her father that she had her own theories concerning Ithaca Foger, and they extended much further than the renegade nation of Kranjovia.

Her inner discomfort was broken by the soft bell of an intercom call echoing through the room. Pulling out his phone, Tom Sr. touched the button which keyed it into the Enterprises intercom net. "Yes?"

After a few moments everyone could see an odd expression appear on his face. "OK, Tom, she's here with me and I'll pass it on. Looking forward to seeing you and Bud. Have a nice trip."

Switching off the phone he looked at Sandy. "That was your brother. He and Bud are on their way back from Loonau." Tom Sr. was referring to the Pacific island which Swift Enterprises used as their major space launching site.

"Oh, neat. But . . . is there trouble?"

"I'm not certain. He wanted me to pass on a personal message to you. It sort of sounded like a warning. Apparently he and Bud are bringing someone back with them."

"Oh?"

"Yes. Who in the world is 'The Queen Of Air And Darkness'?"

Sandy's face paled. "Oh my God . . . no!"

Chapter Three: The Queen Of Air And Darkness.

Even given the supersonic speed of the Swift Enterprises' Pigeon Special, it was still a good eight hours later before Sandy and the others were standing at the runway to watch as the jet from Loonauai began slowing to a stop near them. The morning sun was peeking up above the farther shore of Lake Carlopa, putting an attractive glint on the water, and a faint breeze was blowing in. All in all it was shaping up to be a pleasant day.

"I can't imagine why you're so upset," Tom Sr. was telling his daughter.

Sandy snorted. "You of all people should know."

"She's absolutely harmless."

"So's packed snow before the avalanche starts."

Nospe and his wife had accompanied Sandy's mother on a shopping trip, so it was just Sandy, her father, Phyllis and Bingo who patiently waited as the plane's engines shut down. As they watched, the door swung open and the service steps extended.

Bud Barclay was the first out. Swift Enterprises' senior astronaut blinked in the sunlight before spotting the group and, with a tired smile, stepped down from the plane to head in their direction, his steps aiming him directly towards Sandy.

For her part, Sandy accepted a cuddle and small kiss from Bud. "You look bushed," she said to him. "Did you pilot all the way over here?"

"I won the toss," Bud replied. "It was either pilot the plane all the way, or spend the entire flight in the company of Her Highness."

Tom Sr. sighed.

"What was she doing on Loonauai anyway?" Sandy asked.

"She'd been there doing some research," Bud explained. "Or at least that's her story."

"And you brought her back with you?" Phyllis asked.

"Tom was scared she'd somehow wheedle her way onto a flight up to the space station, or elsewhere. We figured it'd be safer if we brought her back here."

Bingo was looking from one to the other. "I am really out of the loop here."

"It's simple," Tom Sr. replied. "They're talking about---"

"Hel-LOOOOOOOO!"

The doorway of the jet was now completely filled with a brown dumpling on legs. Or so that's how it immediately seemed to Bingo. A formidable lump of overcoat, sensible shoes and wild chestnut curls all topped by a dainty hat which seemed destined, at any moment, to fall off the assembly.

Somewhere beneath the fringe of curls a broad smile addressed the group; the bubbly red cheeks framing a barely noticeable button nose, and all of this beneath a pair of sparkling black, porcelain-doll eyes which struggled to remain visible from within the folds of the friendly, pudding face.

The apparition bounced happily down the stairs, the eyes flickering about. "Swift Enterprises," she exclaimed lustily. "Established temple of scientific brilliance. Fountainhead of adventure for those who starve for it in heroic amounts."

"Hi, Mrs. A.," Sandy and Phyllis both murmured in unison.

Bingo was still wide-eyed. "What the heck . . ."

Spotting Sandy, the woman immediately reached into the folds of her overcoat, removing a well-used hand computer.

Her plump fingers dancing over the keys she began intoning. "Sandra Swift stood on the edge of the airfield . . . her lithe form poised to once again launch into the staggering depths of the Unknown."

Phyllis was gently trying to step out of sight, but the tiny black eyes had zeroed in on her. "Phyllis Newton," the woman announced sonorously, her fingers working. "Sandy's plucky companion, prepared to accompany her bosom companion into the maw of Perdition itself, if so needed."

"I've been `plucky' for years now," Phyllis complained to Sandy. "Don't I rate a promotion?"

"Who is this person?" Bingo demanded.

Tom Sr. smiled at the younger woman. "Why, Bingo. You mean to tell me you've never read Tom Swift And His Refrigerated Tree Farm? Or Tom Swift And His Repelatron Traffic Controller? Or how about Sandra Swift And The Stiletto Heel Assassins?"

"Or my favorite," Bud added.

"Bud," Sandra said warningly.

"Sandra Swift And The Missing Sorority House."

Sandy punched Bud in the stomach. "You promised me you'd never mention that title again in my presence. You promised!"

Smiling weakly, Bud rubbed at his stomach.

Bingo was once again staring at the newcomer. "So this is---"

"Herself," agreed Tom Sr. "Mrs. Victoria Applepound. Celebrated author for the Strait-Oscar Publishing Syndicate."

"Busily chronicling the celebrated adventures as a lull in the non-stop excitement ensued," the woman was muttering half to herself as she continued typing. "Who could know that, in just a few moments, a horrendous fate would descend upon the sudden peace?"

Everybody instinctively looked around.

"She might mean me," announced Tom Swift Jr. as he appeared in the jet's doorway. "I could use a shower."

"His stalwart body carrying the sweat of the efforts he had experienced---"

Leaving the plane, Tom brushed past Mrs. Applepound to give Phyllis an exhausted hug. "God, I feel as if I've been in a centrifuge for hours."

"His mind whirling with concepts far beyond the fathoming of normal minds---"

"Right now I could fathom eight hours solid sleep. In my bed. With the door shut. And locked."

"Every so often he would remove himself from the concerns of ordinary men. When he emerged again, the world would quiver in excitement---"

"She's been doing that ever since we left Loonau," Tom explained tiredly to the others. "Apparently she's working on both a new book about me, and one about Sandy."

Sandy moaned. "What the heck does she have me doing this time?"

"Sandra Swift And The Toenail Clippers Of Kali!" Mrs. Applepound announced happily. "Horror, intrigue and personal hygiene, all in one volume. Destined to move the imaginations of your legions of loyal fans."

"They'll move all right," muttered Phyllis.

"A considerable distance," added Sandy.

"At least you get off better than I do," Tom told them. "Guess what I'm inventing now?"

"I'm afraid to ask---"

"Tom Swift And His Frictionless Toupee," broke in Mrs. Applepound.

Sandy's mouth dropped open.

"Understand I'm not the one in the story wearing the toupee," Tom explained to his sister. "Apparently it's got something to do with stolen nanotech."

Tom Sr. was chuckling.

His son fixed him with a hard look. "Oh, thanks. You can laugh. You got off pretty easy from her brother."

"Tom---"

"I don't mind so much being the subject of these books," Tom explained. "I understand the marketing advantage. And I understand the contractual obligations we have to observe. But . . ." He waved a hand off in the general direction of the woman who was standing near the wing of the plane, lost in her work. "Sometimes she makes me look like such a two-dimensional idiot. A one-note dullard who's always hanging out in a laboratory, never getting out and enjoying life or having any fun. I mean, where in God's name does she get that impression about me?"

Silence, except for some nervous whistling from Phyllis.

"Bud and I figured that, if we hauled her happy self back from Loonau, we could eventually arrange to ship her back to Binghamton and she could dangle some participles. Or something."

"Probably just as well," his father remarked, still looking amused. "Things are heating up around here."

Both Tom and Bud seemed interested. "Oh?" asked Bud.

Over by the wing, Mrs. Applepound paused. From where she stood, Sandy could swear the older woman's ears were swiveling like receiving antennae.

"Earhardt Nospe's over here with a problem," Tom Sr. explained. "A real mystery."

Tom's eyes glittered with interest.

"Open new chapter," Mrs. Applepound whispered to her computer. "Working title: Tom Swift And The Cobalt Sausage." Her fingers began racing. "At the sound of the German name, Tom's young blood became electrified with anticipation . . ."

Tom's eyes slowly dragged to the author's pudgy form. But then his expression brightened. "Say! But if Mr. Nospe's here, then that means the house is occupied."

"True," his father conceded.

"That means Mrs. Applepound will have to stay elsewhere."

"You don't have to be so gleeful about it, Tom."

"And besides," Sandy added, "things might not be as good as you'd think."

Tom looked at her. "Oh?"

"Herr Nospe brought his wife with him."

"Oh? Well. That's no problem. Miz Nospe's nice."

Sandy nodded. "Uh huh. And so are the pictures of her new grandbaby that she brought."

It took a few moments before Tom's eyes slowly closed and he groaned loudly.

"That's right," Sandy said sweetly. "And I've already been sitting through Mom's Very Loud `Grandchildren Are So Nice' lecture. Now it's your turn."

"I . . . want to go hear what Mr. Nospe has for us."

"Nope. I've already heard it, and am already working on it." Sandy crossed her arms, glaring at her older brother. "Finders Keepers. I get to research the case further, and you get to go sit in the living room and be reminded that you and Phyllis aren't getting any younger."

Silence except for an increase in the volume of Phyllis' whistling.

"An American Family'," Mrs. Applepound was murmuring, peering closely at the little screen on her computer. "Facing the realities of Life in the face of Adventure and on the frontiers of Science."

"We'll all go and welcome Earhardt and Tèa," Tom Sr. announced firmly. "They're both eager to say hello to you, Tom. And Bingo? I understand you were going to help Mary with something special."

Bingo nodded. "I'm gonna try to make Pears A L'Allemande. And a rum cake, if I can manage it."

"Oooh," Bud murmured.

"And I'm certain there'll be enough for you as well," Sandy replied, slipping her hand around his.

Bud smiled.

"Presuming, of course, that you also stay for the Grandbaby Lecture."

Sandy's hand tightened as Bud tried to worm away.

Tom was staring off towards something. "Isn't that Mr. Nospe right now?"

Everyone turned to see one of the Enterprises utility carts moving down the road towards them. Nospe could clearly be seen, sitting next to a uniformed driver.

Jumping out almost before the cart had a chance to stop, he quickly approached the group, nodding at the newcomers. "Tom! Ahh . . . Commander Barclay."

Tom Sr. frowned. "What's wrong, Earhardt?"

"It's happened again. Another attack."

"What?"

Nospe was nodding, trying to catch his breath. "It's just been coming over the news, and I've called some people I know to confirm it. A warehouse has been broken into. A wall smashed and the interior exposed to the same force as before."

"Where did this one happen?" Sandy asked.

"That's the incredible part about this," Nospe told her. "This time it's here. The warehouse was located outside of Cincinnati." He took a deep breath. "The attackers are here in this country."

Chapter Four: Sandy Sets Out.

Commandeering a second cart, everyone quickly drove away from the airfield (Mrs. Applepound managing to plant herself in the rear of the second cart, remaining as quiet as possible save for an occasional murmur to her computer). During the trip, Nospe was explaining to Tom and Bud the reasons behind his visit and the events which had taken place in Europe.

Reaching the Administration Building, the group immediately went up to the conference room, where Nospe (having gained some familiarity in handling the controls for the central display) called up a recording of a recent newscast.

"Give us a brief, Earhardt," Tom Sr. asked, settling down into a seat next to his friend.

"Watch," Nospe replied, pointing at the screen and lowering the sound. The large display was now showing several emergency vehicles parked near what seemed to be a rather substantial looking warehouse.

The building had obviously seen better days. The attention of the officials on the screen, as well as the reporters on the site, were focused on a large jagged opening in the nearest wall. From where the viewers in the conference room sat, the wall looked as if it had been clearly designed to provide secure protection for whatever contents had been inside the building. But the design had failed. Sandy could easily see the now uncomfortably familiar evidence of twisted metal, as if an enormous fist had punched its way through the wall.

"No one was killed, this time," Nospe remarked. "This occurred just before sunrise this morning. The warehouse is located in," he consulted a note he had made, "Port Union. Just north of Cincinnati."

Bud had taken the seat next to Sandy. "What was in the warehouse?" he asked.

"According to this broadcast, it was a chemical storage facility." Nospe again glanced at his notes. "Phosphates . . . mainly ortho and polyphosphates."

Sandy glanced over at her brother. Tom hadn't yet sat down but was leaning across the table, staring keenly at the screen.

His father noticed his son's attention. "Well, Tom?"

"Incredible," Tom murmured. "And this is similar to the sort of thing which has been happening in Europe?" he asked Nospe.

Nospe nodded. "Ja."

Tom and his father stared at each other silently for several moments before Tom finally shook his head and sat down. "Nothing," he said. "Nothing immediate."

"Well I've got one," Sandy said.

Everyone looked at her and she nodded at the screen. "Phosphates. Simple chemicals."

"Ja, Sandy."

She looked at Nospe. "So there aren't any phosphates in Germany? In Europe?" She loosely waved a hand at the screen. "Why hit a warehouse over here in the United States?"

"Good one," Phyllis whispered.

"A very good question," Tom Sr. added, giving his daughter an appreciative nod. "You're thinking that, maybe, these aren't the same people?"

In answer, Sandy got up and moved around the table to give the image on the screen a closer look. "This damage looks similar to what Herr Nospe's shown us," she said, half to herself. She turned to look at the group. "I guess the obvious thing to do now would be to compare the investigative findings from Europe to what gets found out here."

"True," Tom Sr. replied. "Earhardt, you said your people were going to be sending us their lab results?"

"The results should be arriving soon," Nospe told him. "I was going to contact my people and get an update."

Nodding, Tom Sr. turned to his son. "Tom?"

"I can get the ball started here," the younger Swift said. "When the results come in we can begin analysis in depth." He was still gazing at the image on the screen and shook his head. "That is just so freaking weird," he added softly. "It would help if we had some results from this event soonest."

Suddenly sighing he sat back down. "The obvious thing to do would be to take the Flying Lab to Port Union and conduct direct research there. Unfortunately . . ."

"Unfortunately, Sky Queen III is still three months away from its first test flight," Tom Sr. finished morosely.

"Yes," agreed Nospe sadly. "I was very upset to hear about the loss of your famous aircraft in Nevada, Tom."

"Thanks," Tom said.

Sandy had been idly turning back and forth in her chair. She now took in Phyllis with a glance, then turned to the others. "I could go there and make some inquiries."

She had everyone's attention. "Port Union's not that far away," she went on. "I could take an Omnicopter. It'd be much easier than the Flying Lab for getting closer to the warehouse, and I could consult with the authorities in the area."

Her father considered the idea for a few moments before turning to Nospe. "Earhardt?"

The amused smile on Nospe's face was best described as "crooked". "I certainly have no fault with Sandy's investigative abilities," he said.

Sandy attempted to stem a rising blush with a question. "What I want to know is: how do we stand officially in regards to this? The European governments have asked for our assistance. Could we get equally involved on this local event?"

"Good one number two," Phyllis said.

Once again Tom Sr. and Nospe exchanged a look. "The State Department made arrangements for us to cooperate with the Europeans," Tom Sr. slowly said. "If we're agreed that a connection exists to what happened in Ohio, I could get in touch with the Department and work out some way to allow us to look into this."

"If this is the same thing," his son added, "and if it's starting to happen here as well as in Europe, then we'd definitely want to get involved."

"True." Tom Sr. looked across the table at Sandy. "What would you need, honey?"

"I'm thinking maybe an accommodation pod for the Omnicopter," Sandy replied with a shrug. "We might be there a few days. I don't know if Tom would want us to take any equipment . . ."

Her brother considered it. "Without knowing exactly what we're looking for, we'd be operating in the dark this early," he said. "Best to just consult with the local authorities, find out if they've uncovered anything and get those results back here."

Sandy nodded briskly and stood up. "Right. Just let me get an overnight bag together---"

Bud frowned. "You leaving immediately?"

Sandy indicated the screen with a hand. "We're waiting for another attack?"

"Well . . . yeah. Point."

Phyllis also stood up. "I can throw some things together and be out at the airfield."

Bingo had also come to her feet. "Time to saddle up."

"Just let me take a quick shower---" Bud began.

But Sandy touched his shoulder. "Down, boy."

"Huh?"

"You just got finished flying halfway around the world," Sandy explained. "You can use more than a shower. A decent rest would help." Sensing Bud's rising protest, she pushed on. "I also need you here as my ace in the hole in case Tom or I find something that requires immediate travel elsewhere. Phyl and Bingo and I can snoop around a bit and come right back with the goodies."

Nospe was smiling, mostly from memories.

"I don't like it," Bud said.

Sandy's hand lightly brushed his cheek. "I'll be back shortly."

Forty-five minutes later found Sandy and some of the others trooping towards the Enterprises hangars. Ahead of them a ground crew was rolling out one of the Swift Omnicopters. The boxlike contraption stood twenty feet high, topped by a sleek bubble-shaped cockpit at the forward end, and twin helicopter rotors. Tom had originally designed the aircraft to serve as a device to take on duties such as skywriting, or assisting in transporting cargo or fighting forest fires. Known then as the Graphicopter, its development into a more utilitarian vehicle had grown until it now served as one of Enterprises' prime aviation exports.

The Omnicopter's shape was due to the large cube which fitted neatly into the long-legged frame of the vehicle. It was one of a variety of specialty "pods" which allowed the Omnicopter to perform numerous tasks.

Sandy was leading the group, a small overnight bag slung casually over her shoulder, and she waved a greeting at the ground crew.

Bingo picked up her pace to move closer. "Your Mom knows what to do about the pears and the cake," she said. "I'm just glad she didn't mind me tagging along here."

"Me too," Sandy said, suspecting, as before, that her Mom held some sort of ulterior motive in wanting Bingo to serve as her shadow. Not that she minded. "I really don't like doing this sort of thing alone. Hate to run out on the party, though."

"Including the Grandbaby Lecture?" Phyllis asked with a smile.

"We must all make sacrifices," Sandy replied loftily.

"Firmly preparing to hurl herself into an unknown adventure'," a familiar voice murmured.

Sandy suddenly raised a hand. "Stop!"

Everyone paused, and Sandy turned to see Mrs. Applepound trying to remain inconspicuous behind Phyllis. Not too successfully.

Sandy sighed loudly. "Mrs. Applepound . . . what are you doing?"

The author made every attempt to make herself smaller. "Well, seeing as how it looks as if there's plenty of room---"

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Applepound, but this happens to be a formal investigation." Sandy was trying hard to ignore Bud and Tom, both of whom were standing behind the writer, making large shooing motions behind her back.

Even harder to ignore was the sorrowful widening of the dark eyes, and the quivering of the lower lip. The last time Sandy had seen such an expression it had been on a basset hound puppy.

"Oh, I hate it when she does that," she softly complained, turning to Phyllis. "And how in the world does she manage to wander around here without a security amulet anyway?"

"The same way Herr Nospe does," Phyllis pointed out. "Tom brought her into Enterprises the way Herr Nospe's jet was cleared. No need for further clearance. It's kind of like inviting a vampire into your house."

"Nice analogy. Is she still on the verge of tears back there?"

Phyllis looked past Sandy's shoulder. "Yeah. Sort of cute, actually."

"We used to have a painting of a girl with an expression like that on the wall at home," Bingo added. "It was painted on velvet."

Sandy closed her eyes, rubbing wearily at her forehead.

"San---," began Phyllis.

"Phyl, we're checking out a complex scientific problem. A mystery."

"She actually doesn't eat all that much," Phyllis said kindly.

"I'm on a gluten-free diet," Mrs. Applepound announced brightly.

Sandy felt she could feel her hair falling out. "Why in Heaven's name would we want to haul Her Highness around with us for?" she said in low exasperation to Phyllis and Bingo.

"It really would be better if we got her out from underfoot during the work being done here," Phyllis pointed out.

Sandy growled.

"Besides," Bingo added, "maybe this'll get you put into a better book than Tom. No chasin' around a haunted toenail clipper."

"Arrghhhhhh!" Gritting her teeth, Sandy forced herself to slowly calm down, counting to ten in English, binary and Mohawk before finally turning back and giving the older woman a resigned wave. "Come along, Mrs. Applepound . . . come along."

Sandy could swear she almost saw a tail wagging happily as the author bounded closer to them. Behind her both Tom and Bud turned and rapidly moved away, exchanging high-fives.

"Sharing unheralded exploits," Mrs. Applepound intoned briskly, her fingers nimbly moving on her computer. "What fearsome events lurk ahead for our stalwart quartet?"

"How about we're going to go look at a broken warehouse?" Sandy offered sullenly.

Mrs. Applepound considered it. "Too tame, Sandra. May I change the warehouse in Ohio to a ruined castle on the Cornish coast of England?"

"Whatever!"

Reaching the Omnicopter, Sandy indicated the open door in the side of the pod. "Go ahead and make yourselves comfortable inside," she told the others. "We'll be taking off soon so make sure you're all strapped in good. I'll seal the hatch from the cockpit." Not waiting to see if her instructions were followed, she went to the nearby ladder and began climbing up to the cockpit.

And was surprised to notice Phyllis following. "Oh!"

Phyllis glanced back down to see Bingo escorting Mrs. Applepound into the pod. "What?" she asked Sandy. "You expected me to ride out the trip with Mrs. A?"

"Well . . . actually no." Sandy continued up the ladder and was soon climbing into the cockpit and settling before the Omnicopter's controls.

Phyllis slid into the adjoining seat, giving a glance to the hatchway set into the floor which allowed direct passage into the pod. "We're soundproof up here, aren't we?"

"Thankfully, yes." Putting on a headset, Sandy touched a button which connected her by intercom into the pod. "You two okay down there?"

Listening for a moment, Sandy soon sighed. "Mrs. Applepound, if you want to include a mad duke and flesh-eating zombies, then that's all right with me. Just keep them off the flight deck, okay hon?" She glared over at Phyllis. "Stop laughing."

A few minutes later the rotors atop the Omnicopter spun into life and the vehicle rose into the air, gradually pointing towards the southwest as it began its three hour trip to Ohio.

"This isn't an investigation," Sandy muttered, "it's a babysitting job."

"As long as I get an upgrade from 'plucky', I frankly don't mind having her along," Phyllis replied.

"Good! You can rescue her from the erupting volcano."

Phyllis frowned. "What erupting volcano?"

"The one she's probably writing into the story right now."

Some time later Sandy was guiding the Omnicopter south of Akron when a beeping sound began. Looking down, Sandy studied the radar display between her and Phyllis. "Huh! We've got a Tommycar on an intercept course."

"Is it Tom? Or Bud?"

"If it is, they've taken the long way around. It's coming at us from the northwest. And, if it's them, why haven't they contacted us?"

"Maybe it's an official vehicle," Phyllis suggested. "Your Dad was gonna light a fire under some people to get us credentials."

But Sandy frowned, reaching down to touch some of the radar controls. "Its ident transmitter isn't sending."

Reaching for the radio controls she touched another button, speaking into her headset. "Unidentified atomicar on approach, this is Swift OM/181 out of Shopton, New York. Please identify and state your intentions."

No answer.

"He's coming up fast," Phyllis commented, looking up from the radar to peer through the cockpit.

"Yeah, and whoever he is he's gonna face a truckload of trouble. If his ident isn't working he's facing whopping fines for flying a masked Tommy . . . whoa!"

Grabbing the controls tightly, Sandy shifted the Omnicopter as a sleek, dark shape raced past them and on into the sky. She and Phyllis had only a glance, but the newcomer was obviously one of the triphibian atomicars produced by Swift Enterprises.

"What the hell is that guy doing?" Sandy said, working to steady the Omnicopter back on course. "He nearly clipped us with that maneuver."

Phyllis was watching the radar. "He's heading flat out. Four . . . five . . . six miles . . . he's starting to turn back around."

"I see him," Sandy said. Moving the controls she increased the Omnicopter's speed. Once again she touched the radio controls. "Unidentified atomicar break off. Break off! You're endangering us . . ."

"San!"

But Sandy also saw it. On the radar display two small blips had detached from the larger blip which indicated the pursuing atomicar. The smaller blips were obviously heading for the Omnicopter.

Beneath the radar a display strip began producing an announcement.

Reading it, Phyllis' eyes widened. "Missiles!"

"Heat seekers," added Sandy.

Chapter Five: Anatomy Of An Attack.

Her eyes frozen on the radar screen, Phyllis felt her insides trying to rise up into her throat and escape through her mouth. The blips indicating the missiles were approaching quickly. Very quickly. She wanted to do something, even if it was nothing more than

panicking rather loudly. But, in spite of her feelings, she was mindful of the presence of Sandy next to her and struggled to keep herself out of the way.

Next to her, Sandy's mind was racing. She calculated they only had twelve seconds before the missiles impacted. Then it was eleven . . . then ten . . .

Think, her brain screamed.

She tore her eyes away from the radar, glancing quickly over the small console for the Omnicopter. Time running out . . .

Yes!

Her hands moved, fingers skipping rapidly over the touch-sensitive control screen. Calling up the Emergency Systems, then making a selection which included a very necessary override command. "Hang on," she shouted.

Where would I go? Phyllis wondered.

At the upper aft end of the Omnicopter hull a gleaming white flower budded. Budded, then rapidly blossomed, becoming a broad diamond shape which pulled at the aircraft. There was the brief boom of an explosive charge, and the shape quickly fell away from the Omnicopter, which continued flying on.

Behind it, the pursuing missiles struck the gleaming shape, causing it to stretch obscenely. Then the missiles detonated, the shrapnel from the warheads trapped within the fragments of a bursting globe of foam plastic.

Further ahead, Sandy shrieked in triumph. "Oh, Tom, I love you!"

Phyllis was working to steady herself. "Wh-what . . ."

"Not yet," Sandy snapped. "We're not out of the woods yet, oh-hhhhh . . . Mama!"

Both she and Phyllis instinctively ducked as the attacking atomical swept rapidly past them, arcing away in a gradual circle.

"He's not finished," Sandy growled, her hands firmly on the controls, causing the Omnicopter to bank sharply. "I'm betting he'll make another run. Crap! I could maneuver better if I jettisoned the pod."

Phyllis stared at her. "Mrs. Applepound's down there . . ."

A thoughtful light entered Sandy's eyes.

". . . and Bingo," Phyllis quickly added.

Letting out another growl, Sandy continued turning the aircraft while, at the same time, increasing the Omnicopter's speed and increasing the power of the rotors.

Phyllis was staring at the radar display. "San."

"Shhhhh!"

"But you're taking us closer to the atomicar."

"I know! I'm also trying to gain as much altitude as possible. Hush!"

Phyllis watched, struggling to remind herself that Sandy's craziness was external. Usually. Meanwhile, the atomicar had turned back in their direction, and the distance between them was growing smaller with each moment.

And Sandy was tapping at the control screen. On it suddenly glowed the message: EMERGENCY FIRE EXTINGUISHER SYSTEM ARMED.

"Hang on," Sandy said, her hand tightening on the throttle. "We're about to take the express elevator down."

To Phyllis it seemed as if only seconds remained before the Omnicopter and atomicar collided.

"Annnnnnd . . . now!" Sandy's hand slapped at the control screen while, at the same time, pulling back hard on the throttle.

The Omnicopter suddenly began falling rapidly. Grabbing at herself, and trying to stifle a shriek (as well as control her stomach), Phyllis looked up to see both of the Omnicopter rotors still turning, only nowhere near as fast as they should have been. Not only that, but white smoke was streaming from both engines.

"There!" Sandy cried out.

It took a moment for Phyllis to realize what Sandy meant. She couldn't see the atomicar, but the radar display showed that two more missiles had been fired . . . and these were less than a heartbeat away from them.

"C'mon," Sandy breathed, half to herself.

A pair of slender, lethal shapes swept past Phyllis' view. A moment, then two, and then Phyllis was aware that they were still alive. "Sandy."

But Sandy was shaking her head, her eyes moving from the altimeter to the radar and back.

"C'mon guys," she was muttering. "C'mon."

The Omnicopter was still falling. Phyllis knew enough about aviation to know that the engines were dead, and the rotors overhead were trying to keep the aircraft aloft through autorotation, but it was still going to be a rough landing. Possibly very rough.

"C'mon," Sandy was saying, her eyes now fixed on the radar. "C'mon . . . yes!"

Her hand slammed the throttle forward. Above them the rotors coughed and tried to move . . . froze once . . . twice . . . then slowly began to turn as the engines caught.

"Let's go, babies," Sandy pleaded in a low voice, her hand still working the throttle. "C'mon, honeys. Please."

Another grinding choke . . . a whine of protest . . . and then both the rotors suddenly whirled into life. The Omnicopter's descent began slowing, but the ground was still coming up rapidly.

To Phyllis' eyes it looked as if Sandy was trying to rip the throttle column out of the floor.

"C'mon!" she was moaning. "C'monnnnnnnnn . . .!"

A brief view of terraced farmland rising in all directions, and then both Sandy and Phyllis were almost snapped in half as the Omnicopter settled down hard upon the ground. "Ohhhhhhhhhhh!"

Both women sat there, grimacing and clutching their waists as the Omnicopter whined in protest all around. Gasping for breath, Sandy painfully reached out and began touching controls, shutting down the aircraft.

Her fingers paused as she was about to touch the radar display and she frowned, then scowled upwards through the cockpit. "Damnation!"

Wincing at the outburst, Phyllis quickly looked up and could see nothing . . . no! There was an unusual looking cloud nearby. One which was slowly expanding. "What the heck?"

"The missiles hit the atomicar," Sandy declared, angrily hitting the console with her hand. "Blew it out of the sky."

Phyllis stared at her friend. "And you're complaining?"

"I wanted to question whoever was flying that atomicar."

"Oh!" Phyllis was about to sit back, close her eyes and struggle with her pain, but she suddenly recalled something and scrambled about for the headset which had been knocked off of Sandy during the crash landing.

Slipping it on her head she switched on the intercom. "Hello? Hello?"

A few moments, then she nodded at Sandy. "They're banged up, but OK."

Sandy tiredly returned Phyllis' nod and began unstrapping herself.

"Where exactly are we?" Phyllis asked.

"Somewhere between Marshallville and Fox Lake," Sandy said, groaning as she tried stretching. "About ten or so miles southwest of Akron."

Phyllis cracked open the cockpit hatch, letting the fresh air come in. "So! Since we've officially made what's called a 'good landing' . . ."

"Yeah. Do you understand now how I took out the first two missiles?"

"No. It happened too fast."

"Well, like all Swift aircraft, this Omnicopter carries a Duratherm Wing in case of emergencies. I simply deployed it, then jettisoned it into the path of the missiles. Kind of like throwing a big lump of chaff at them."

"Wow."

"A big chance, but fortunately it worked."

Together, they climbed out of the cockpit and carefully began descending the ladder. "Then what about the second group of missiles?"

"That's where I was really getting desperate," Sandy replied. "First off, I guessed the seeker heads on the missiles wouldn't automatically activate upon launch, but would engage a few seconds later. That's why I wanted to get very close to the atomicar."

"Aha!"

"Yeah. It bought us a little more time. Enough to try and give the missiles something else besides us to hunt. That meant having them search for an alternate heat source."

They reached the ground and Sandy leaned against the ladder. "To eliminate us as a heat source I shut off the engines and, at the same time, set off the fire extinguisher which sprayed the engines, immediately cooling them."

"That's why you needed the altitude. You wanted to give us room to fall."

Sandy nodded. "I wanted the missiles to find another heat source and lock onto it before I switched the engines back on." She sighed. "And that's exactly what the missiles did. Up there the only remaining available target was the atomicar."

"I hope you'll forgive me, San, if I don't cry myself to sleep tonight."

"Yeah, I know. I know, oh . . . hi, Bingo."

The hatch to the accommodation pod had creaked open, and Bingo was stumbling out, leading a none-too-steady Mrs. Applepound.

"Wooooo!" Bingo remarked, blinking into the sunlight. "What a ride."

Mrs. Applepound was staring unhappily at her computer. "I hit the wrong key and deleted the whole chapter. Goodness, Sandra, that was a bit severe in the way of a landing, dear."

"Thank God Bingo was with you," Sandy muttered. "It could've been rougher."

"Pardon?"

Shaking her head, Sandy allowed herself to slide down against the Omnicopter hull, sitting down upon the ground with a small groan. "Now I know how a tenderized steak feels."

"I'll go dig out the medical kit," Bingo said, turning back into the pod. "I `spect we're all gonna look like first prize in the Bruise Finals before long."

Phyllis was joining Sandy on the ground. "You hanging in there, Mrs. A?" she asked.

"I fear my fundament could use an extensive relationship with some hot water and some liniment," the older woman remarked, one hand reaching behind her to give the mentioned area a cautious pat.

"That may yet come for all of us," Sandy said, peering off into the distance. "Unless I miss my guess, those emergency vehicles are looking for us. Which reminds me." Reaching into her pocket she pulled out her Swift Enterprises Snooper: a pair of objects which resembled thick fountain pens. Taking one of them in hand she carefully twisted the top, setting off an emergency beacon which would be picked up by Enterprises receivers.

"If the air traffic crew back in Shopton are awake, they've probably wondered why we suddenly dropped off the radar screen," she explained. "This'll bring them running."

"Then what happens?" Phyllis quietly asked. "We go back to Shopton?"

Sandy's eyes had almost drifted shut. They now snapped back open, and both Phyllis and Mrs. Applepound were taken aback by the hardness in them.

"That's what a lot of people will want," Sandy remarked coldly. "Logically that's what should happen. But the situation's changed. We were wondering if it would be difficult to become involved in what was, up until now, strictly a European problem."

"You're saying it's no longer just that." It wasn't a question.

"Not any more," Sandy replied. Her right hand had become a fist, and she now brought it up to strike the hull of the Omnicopter. Hard. "Now it's personal."

Chapter Six: Conversation With A Shark.

A small caravan of fire trucks, ambulances and private cars were scurrying down a nearby road towards the Omnicopter, lights flashing and, in Bingo's words, "sah-RENS goin' full blast!"

Meanwhile, Sandy had made contact with Enterprises via her Snooper, explaining the situation as calmly as possible to the people who had been monitoring their flight. At the approach of the emergency vehicles she switched off, suspecting that the next few minutes back in Shopton were going to be interesting.

Bingo, who was managing the duties of Unofficial Medical Officer, was gently poking and prodding about Sandy's body.

"Ow," Sandy replied. "Ow . . . ow-ow . . . ow . . . BIG OW!"

"Yeah," Bingo was muttering half to herself, "sort of figured you'd pull that one the wrong way." Then her voice picked up. "Lissen . . . I knows you're prob'ly in an all-fired hurry to get on with this business. But it wouldn't hurt to get us checked over for possible internal injuries." Bingo blinked in consideration. "On the other hand, I bet it'd hurt a lot."

"It's hurting now," Sandy complained, trying to move her shoulder away from Bingo's ministrations.

"Sorry." Bingo sat back on her ankles.

"Not that I'm disagreeing with you, though," Sandy continued. "There are some things I'd like to work out personally before proceeding. It's just that I'm gonna get yelled at for ending up in a hospital again."

Phyllis frowned. "No, last time it was Tom who ended up in the hospital."

"Yeah, but I'm still gonna get yelled at. Besides," she added in a slightly lower voice, "some of us might need more attention than others." With a small nod she indicated Mrs. Applepound who was concentrating on rubbing the small of her back, wincing in discomfort with her eyes closed.

The convoy of vehicles now pulled up near the Omnicopter, and Sandy tiredly struggled to her feet as a crowd of emergency medics, police officers, fire fighters and curious locals drew close.

"Oh . . . oh, my God!," she heard one of them remark excitedly. "It can't be! But it is. It's her!"

"It is," agreed someone else.

Sandy managed to drum up a smile, having become accustomed to being greeted as a celebrity before.

"It's really Victoria Applepound!" the first person shrieked out. "The writer. She's actually here. In person!" And, as Sandy stood by and watched on, a group of people moved quickly past her to gather closely around the older woman.

"Are you all right?" one of the group anxiously asked Mrs. Applepound.

"Are you working on another novel?" asked another admirer.

"Well, yes," Mrs. Applepound managed to remark brightly, "and yes!"

"Will it be a sequel to Sandra Swift And The Missing Sorority House?" a third person inquired. "When I read that book I swear you were speaking to me personally."

"Phyllis," muttered Sandy.

"Yes?"

"Kill me now."

Matters soon worked to turn the girls thoughts away from the idly suicidal as they found themselves hemmed in by medics and police and subjected to a full battery of examinations and questions. Sandy handled everything as best as she could, in turn

receiving a promise from the local authorities to have the Omnicopter surrounded by police and guarded until a recovery crew could be summoned from Enterprises. With that chore accomplished, they allowed themselves to be bundled into the waiting ambulances and taken down to nearby Orrville and the Dunlap Community Hospital. There, a much more comprehensive series of tests indicated that all injuries were slight, and even Mrs. Applepound was suffering little more than a bruise to the dignity.

"Incomprehensively thrilling," was how the author referred to the experience as they were all settling onto the beds in their temporary ward space. "Perhaps I should contemplate having myself included on the cover of the book this time around." She tapped her chin thoughtfully. "Should I depict myself wearing a leopard-skin loincloth, or a chain-mail bikini?"

Struggling to keep her immediate response firmly buried, Sandy leaned back against the pillows on her bed and pulled out her Snooper, once again switching on the communicator. "Anyone home?"

"Only the hired help," a familiar voice replied.

Sandy brightened. "Sherman! Just the person I'm looking for. I have to confess, though, I've just lost a bet with myself. I was expecting to end up being permanently attached to this thing while explaining the situation to the folks."

"Oh they're all busy," remarked Sherman Ames, the young security chief of Swift Enterprises. "I'm watching the burners here and can patch you through. Hold on."

"Wait, wait, wait . . . you're the one I'm wanting to talk to first."

From across the room, Phyllis raised an eyebrow at her.

"Well! I'm flattered. Should Bud be worried?"

"Not quite like that. And I do want to talk to him and the folks. But I've got thoughts running around in my head that I need to bounce off you while they're still fresh."

"Proceed." And Sandy could clearly hear the shift in tone from family friend to the professional quietly known among his co-workers as "The Shark".

"What do you know about our crash?"

"We've all seen the telemetry feed and heard the cockpit recordings that the Omnicopter transmitted just before you guys landed," Sherman reported.

"Okay," Sandy nodded to the air. "Good. First off: am I the only one who found it odd that, of all the possible ways to launch missiles at us, an atomicar was used?"

"Admittedly that has bothered me, too. But not nearly as much as it's bothered your father."

"Oh dear."

"Sandy, I never want to see your father so angry ever again in my life. When he found out someone had put weapons on a Swift vehicle, I thought he was actually going to start throwing things around."

"Yeah, Dad has always had a . . . thing about using weapons. Some of the munitions work he did in the past has sort of weighed on his conscience. You missed out on what happened when Tom wanted to add an oscillator gun to the Jetmarine."

"Actually, having seen what I've seen, I'm glad I did."

"Ummm. But, getting back . . ."

"Yeah. Sandy, just between you and me, I could easily come up with much more efficient platforms for launching missiles. Using an atomicar isn't in itself a bad idea, but it involves some extensive retrofitting."

"Which leaves me with two theories. Either our attacker had easy access to a Tommycar---"

"Or this was meant to be a message."

"And a rather pointed one," Sandy replied. "Listen . . . you should be able to access the atomicar ownership records. With a bit of work---"

"Please, don't tell your grandpa how to suck eggs. I've already got a team working on that angle, and I'll let you know what I find. Of course, any identifying markings you could remember . . ."

"Sorry, Sherman. It all happened too fast, and our attention was focused on more important things. Staying alive, for one."

"Understandable. So. You're thinking that our attackers, whoever they were, knew Enterprises was going to get involved in investigating the warehouse break-in, and set up an ambush."

"That's what I'm thinking. But how in the world did they know we'd be coming by air?"

"Logic. We would've wanted to investigate this as quickly as possible, and that would've meant traveling by air."

"Point. But how did our attackers know when we'd be coming, at what time and from exactly which direction?"

"And I'm still bothered by the fact that the attackers knew we'd be getting involved in the investigation in the first place."

Sandy sighed. "And I have this suspicion that you and I both know the answer."

"Yes. Someone here is spying on us."

"Would that someone have followed Herr Nospe over from Europe?"

"That, or we're dealing with some local talent tipped off by whoever's been carrying out the original attacks."

"OK, next question: is Bud or Tom or anyone else heading here?"

"A transport Omnicopter was just dispatched to pick up your aircraft. It's being escorted by cycloplanes equipped with jamming devices. A stretch Tommycar with medical support gear is being prepared to bring all of you back. Bud and Tom will be flying that one."

"Sherman, I'd rather they remained safe in Shopton---"

"Sandy, I can only hold them back so far. In fact, the main reason I suspect you're currently talking to me on the phone is because they're probably already busy getting ready to take off."

"The people who fired on us could just as well be waiting to fire on them."

"You think? I'm getting an ulcer as well. But I'm gambling that whoever tried to shoot you down wouldn't be prepared to make a second run."

"Sherman---"

"Sandy, I'm currently monitoring everything I can to try and pick up any suspicious transmissions. I've got people out in the field making inquiries. I've contacted the FBI offices in your area, and they're also looking into it. We're on top of the situation, and I'll have a complete report ready when you're back here."

"Well, keep at it. But it'll be a little while longer before we're back home."

Sandy was suddenly aware that she was the focus of attention in the room.

And Sherman's voice from the Snooper also carried a tone of surprise. "Oh?"

"We came here to investigate. I expect us to be released from the hospital fairly soon, and it's still my intention to travel on to Port Union and have a close look at the warehouse. If the boys want, they can fly us there directly."

"They . . . won't like that."

Despite herself, Sandy chuckled. "Oh, I think I can persuade them to cooperate."

From her bed Bingo was softly singing something about "an apple for the Teacher".

"In the meantime I want you to pass on whatever results you find."

"I can handle that. Handling your parents, on the other hand---"

"You're a big boy, Sherman. You'll think of something."

"Gee, thanks."

"I have complete faith in you."

"Yeah, and Dad told me there'd be days like this."

"Take care, Sherman. Out here," and Sandy folded the Snooper shut. Looking up she found three pairs of eyes still staring steadily back at her. "What?"

"Well," Phyllis said evenly, "at least this time we're going to have the boys coming along to keep us company."

Mrs. Applepound reached for her computer. "Oh dear. If we're going to have a steamy, romantic interlude scene, I'll have to re-arrange my outline and move parts of the plot around---"

Sandy sighed. "Mrs. Applepound---"

"But that reminds me. Sandra. I've been meaning to ask. Does Bud usually kiss with his eyes open or closed?"

Sandy's jaw dropped open. "Mrs. Applepound!"

"Eyes closed," Bingo remarked.

"Bingo!"

"I meant . . . ah-hhhhh, wild guess." Bingo quickly delivered this from behind a very deep blush.

"Closed his eyes'," Mrs. Applepound murmured as she tapped on the keys, "'before partaking of the deep passion of Sandra's---'."

"Mrs. Applepound."

"I've got a deadline to reach," the woman protested weakly.

"Well, try and reach it without necking," Sandy replied, unfolding her Snooper as it began humming and barking into it: "What?"

"Sandy!"

"Tom . . . hi. I guess Sherman told you---"

"We've got to get you and the others home quick."

Sandy sighed. "Tom, I explained everything to Sherman---"

"Something else has happened."

"What?"

"It's Mom, Aunt Helen and Mrs. Nospe. They've been kidnapped!"

Chapter Seven: Knight To Queen Two.

"What?"

"Mom and Aunt Helen wanted to take Mrs. Nospe out for some shopping. Sort of get their minds off of things. They went to the mall in Elmira, but their car was just found abandoned outside of Shopton."

Sandy was feeling the bottom of her stomach dropping far below the ground. Her hand was gripping the Snooper painfully. "Dad . . ."

"He's in a blue panic. So's Mr. Nospe."

In her mind's eye, Sandy visualized her father. Her brilliant and fantastic father. Calm when faced with an apparently insurmountable scientific or engineering problem. Casual and controlled before Senate committees or heads of industry.

She saw him now, without Mother. Saw him lost and alone.

"What's being done?" she asked, feeling stupid even as she spoke the words.

"Sherman's already on it, organizing our security people and contacting the local authorities. Sandy---"

"Wait, wait, wait. Weren't Mom and Aunt Helen wearing amulets? Wasn't Frau Nospe given one?"

"The amulets were found with the car. And something was jamming the emergency signals."

Sandy softly swore. Everyone in the Swift family, plus most of the workers at Enterprises, were presented with electronic amulets. These not only controlled access throughout Enterprises, but also beamed emergency signals whenever the wearer was in trouble. Enterprises Security could track the amulets and, through that, locate the wearers.

OK, Sherman, Sandy thought. You'd been arguing for us to have the trackers surgically embedded into our bodies. I guess now you'll get your wish.

"We're launching security drones into the air all around the area," Tom was saying. "We're also getting security teams into the air and on the ground, searching thoroughly all around the car. Sandy, listen. Bud and I will be taking off in a few minutes. We should be picking you up in less than an hour."

Something cool suddenly poured into Sandy's mind. She no longer saw the room, could no longer see the concerned expressions on the faces of Phyllis, Bingo or Mrs. Applepound. Everything was quickly erased from her vision, and yet she was now seeing with a sense of total clarity. As if with the snap of a finger, the inside of her head was now positively arctic with sheer calm. "Tom . . ."

"Yeah?"

Her mouth opened. Closed. Opened again. "Nothing."

"Okay. Stay close together. Make sure the local cops are around. We'll be there soon."

Sandy's hand snapped the Snooper shut, her eyes remaining focused on something only she was seeing. But her attention soon turned to Phyllis and Bingo standing close to her bed; their expressions fixed in tones of helpless concern. Behind them, Mrs. Applepound watched from her bed, her eyes wide and a hand covering her mouth.

"San---" Phyllis whispered brokenly.

"Should've seen this coming," Sandy said half to herself. "Should've seen it. The next logical move."

"What?"

"We were gonna go to Port Union and investigate the break-in. They responded by trying to shoot us out of the sky. They missed, so they went to the next plan: kidnap our Moms." Sandy's eyes remained locked with Phyllis'. "Someone seriously doesn't want us, or anyone connected with this investigation, to go to Port Union."

Bingo's eyes were slowly narrowing. "I've seen that look before," she said. "You're not planning on going back to Shopton with Tom."

Sandy sighed, looking away. "No."

Phyllis' face was close to exploding. "Sandy!"

"Phyl, these people . . . whoever they are . . . are extremely desperate to keep us from finding out what went on in Port Union. So desperate that they'd attempt murder and kidnapping to keep us away from this latest attack. Something there is very important to their plan. Something that we might need to give us leverage in regards to our Moms and Frau Nospe."

"Who're currently in danger," Phyllis pointed out.

"Don't you think I know that?" Sandy shouted back. "Don't you think this isn't eating me alive? It is!" Her earlier calm was fading, and Sandy could feel hot tears growing in her eyes, her hands bunching into fists. "These . . . creeps . . . have got Mom. And your Mom. Right now they've got the upper hand in this situation. We need something to counter them with. It's in Port Union. I know it is."

Phyllis was breathing rapidly, her face crimson.

Bingo's eyes were wider than usual, but a glint of thoughtfulness was also visible in them. "She's right," she softly said to Phyllis.

"Ach . . . Bingo---"

"Phyl, the good Lord knows I wanna fly home real quick and help in lookin' for your Mom, Miz Swift and that nice Miz Nospe. Believe me. I wanna find the guys who did this an' introduce them to a tall tree and a rope!

"But San's right. It's goin' against everything I'm feelin' right now, but she's right. The answer's in Port Union. Or mebbe not the answer, but somethin' we can use to help."

Slapping a hand to her forehead, Phyllis turned away from the bed.

"I'm not asking you to go with me," Sandy said to her back. "None of you, in fact, need to come along with me. I can go on by myself to Port Union. You guys can go back to Shopton and supply moral support."

"That's your job," Phyllis said to the air. "Your father and brother will need you."

"What Dad and Tom and me all need right now is my mother out of danger. And you and your father need Aunt Helen. And I'm reasonably certain Herr Nospe wants his wife back safe and sound. I think a key to all of this can be found in Port Union, but we have to move fast. Whoever's working against us will obviously believe that we'll be heading back to Shopton. They won't expect a continued, immediate effort to snoop around. We have a window of opportunity here, Phyl, and I want to exploit it."

For several moments Phyllis seemed to be gazing out the window of their room, her body tense. But finally she deflated slightly.

"There are moments," she said to the room, "when Tom gets on my nerves because he's right about something. You're picking up the same habit."

From some faraway location, a small smile appeared on Sandy's face. "You can explain to our Dads what I'm up to."

"Oh like Hell I will," Phyllis said, turning back. "I'm certainly not going back home to face the emotional firestorm all by myself. This is presuming," she added, with a nod at Bingo, "that Bingo is gonna accompany you."

Bingo nodded timidly.

"This is the sort of moment when everyone in a family needs to be close together," Phyllis pointed out. "There's gonna be a lot of Bloody Murder screamed when we scarper."

"And if we can bring back the evidence needed to free our Moms?" Sandy asked.

Phyllis hmped. "Then we'll only get half the whipping we'll deserve. But why am I worried?" she added, running fingers through her brunette hair. "This is all just happy theorizing. There's no way in the world Tom or Bud's gonna let us head on out to Port Union."

Sandy nodded slowly. "Actually, I agree with you. But I think I've got a way to convince them."

An eyebrow raised on Phyllis' face. "Oh?"

"Yeah. Mmm . . . Bingo, sweetie? Could you go down the hall and ask that nice Doctor Braithwaite to come here? Pretty please?"

* * * * *

A half-hour later found the girls and Mrs. Applepound quietly standing on the lawn behind Dunlap Community Hospital, near the rear parking lot. Nearby stood a small group of attending hospital personnel, wheelchairs at the ready.

Everyone's attention was on the rather large Swift atomicar which was slowly descending on its thrusters. It was a "Conestoga" style machine: modified for extended range and for carrying oversized loads.

As the people watched, the vehicle smoothly settled down on an empty space nearby within the parking lot, the thrusters idling down as the doors opened to allow Tom and Bud to step out.

Watching them, Sandy's heart ached at the pain clearly etched on their faces. The ache grew at the touch of their hands, and their nearness.

"You're okay," Tom whispered. "We were worrying all the way down here---"

Sandy brought the tips of her fingers to Tom's cheek. "How's Dad?"

Tom let out a sigh. "Pretty messed up."

"Has there been any progress?" Phyllis asked, coming up.

Tom moved to gently take her into his arms. "Not yet, honey. But everything's being done. It'll be better when we get all of you back home."

"Yeah," murmured Phyllis. A shadow seemed to cross her face as she glanced over Tom's shoulder at Sandy.

Nodding slightly, Sandy turned to brush her lips against Bud's. "Hello, Bud."

Bud returned the kiss.

"And goodnight, Bud," Sandy continued, her free hand rising to press the nozzle of the pneumatic injector against Bud's arm, pulling the trigger.

At the touch and the hiss, Bud jerked back in surprise. "Sandy---"

Meanwhile, Bingo had turned and placed another injector against Tom's arm. At its touch, Tom instinctively tried to pull away. "What---"

But the potent mixture of fentanyl and midazolam was already doing its work and, within seconds, both men were collapsing to the ground unconscious.

Phyllis straightened up from the task of easing Tom gently to the ground. Sighing, she wiped her hands on her trousers. "We are so seriously gonna get yelled at for this."

"Keep thinking of our Moms, and Frau Nospe," Sandy pointed out, entangling herself from Bud's limp arms. Reaching into a pocket she removed an envelope which she handed to one of the nearby doctors. "Give this to them when they awaken," Sandy said. "It'll tell them what we're up to."

"Famous last words," Phyllis muttered.

"What we're doing here doesn't exactly qualify as being ethical," the doctor explained to Sandy. "If you hadn't convinced us---"

"I know, I know," Sandy agreed. "Fortunately, our respective families know us well enough not to place any blame on you or the hospital."

"Dealing with an entirely new definition of 'fortunately' here," Phyllis commented as she helped a nurse adjust Tom into a wheelchair.

"Keep them comfortable," Sandy told the hospital staff. "Doubtless someone from the Omnicopter recovery team will be by to pick them up." Bending down, she pressed her lips to Bud's. "Hopefully they'll get into a mood to forgive us."

Phyllis snorted. "You're kidding, right? You realize, of course, what you and I are probably gonna end up having to do in order for the boys to forgive us?"

"Well . . . we knew the job would be dangerous. Let's boogie." Giving Bud another kiss she straightened up and headed for the atomicar, slipping into the pilot's position. Phyllis automatically settled in next to her, with Bingo entering through the right rear passenger door.

Sandy glanced around to the left rear passenger side. "Mrs. Applepound . . ."

The author beamed at Sandy as she finished climbing in and began adjusting her safety belt. "I'll be comfortable, dear."

After a few moments, Sandy sighed. "Welcome aboard, Mrs. Applepound," she said, turning back to the task at hand. A minute later, and the vertical lift thrusters of the atomicar engaged, sending the craft into the air.

"Not gonna waste time here," Sandy declared as they gained altitude. "Distance to Port Union around two hundred miles. If I can peak Mach Two, we'll be there in the proverbial tick."

Pushing the flight yoke forward, Sandy began throttling the atomicar faster and faster away from Orrville. Meanwhile, back at the hospital, the crowd of staff and assorted onlookers gradually began breaking up.

One of the onlookers reached for a phone as he watched the rapidly dwindling shape of the atomicar. After making certain he couldn't be overheard, he quickly dialed a number and began talking. "Der entwurf verlassen. Sandra Swift und die anderen sind auf ihrer Weise zur Port Union!"

Chapter Eight: Caught In The Sights.

"Port Union," Phyllis exclaimed. "At last!"

"Huzzah!" replied both Bingo and Mrs. Applepound.

For her part, Sandy was concentrating on piloting the atomicar, swooping over the Union Center Pavilion Shopping Center. Her attention was drawn to a collection of blinking lights some miles to her left. "Unless I miss my guess," she said, turning the vehicle, "that'll be our destination."

Reaching down she tapped the central touch screen, nodding at the results. "Yes. The Beckett Road storage warehouse for Hamilton Chemicals."

"Or what's left of it," Bingo murmured as she craned her head to look closer. And indeed, as Sandy flew closer, it became evident that the large building had suffered a major catastrophe. The blinking lights belonged to a group of service and emergency vehicles gathered near the northern side of the building. As with the images which Nospe had recorded earlier, the girls could clearly see the enormous opening which had been torn into the wall.

Slowing over Beckett Park, Sandy examined the situation. "There seems to be a police barricade. I'll just set us down near it."

"Inside or outside?" asked Phyllis.

"Let's try just outside," Sandy said, her hands adjusting the control yoke. "We were supposed to be officially included into the investigation, so we'll see just how far the preparations have gone. Besides, with as much trouble as we're in already, I see no reason to cut any more didoes."

"Which reminds me that we haven't heard from the hospital that the boys have awakened."

"I was sort of hoping you weren't gonna bring that up," Sandy said. "I keep thinking we gave them a safe dose."

"You did," Bingo replied from the back seat. "I helped the doctor measure the doses out."

Chewing her lip in concentration, Sandy brought the atomicar down to a landing in a relatively clear section of parking lot near the warehouse. As she began shutting down the engines she noticed a small group of uniformed officers and people in plainclothes approaching them.

"Okay," Sandy said, eyeing the newcomers, "let me do the talking."

Phyllis snorted. "Girl, you've got it."

"I don't know," Bingo speculated. "Maybe they'll turn out to be more fans of Mrs. Applepound."

"Sandra Swift & The Electronic Bicycle Seat Smugglers enjoyed brisk sales in this part of the country," Mrs. Applepound pointed out.

"So we possess a secret weapon," Sandy muttered drily as she opened the door. Climbing out of the atomicar, she turned to face a briskly dressed, slightly older woman.

"Ma'am, unless you have a reason for being here---" the woman began.

"Sandra Swift . . . Swift Enterprises," Sandy said, straightening up.

The surprise flickering across the woman's face was brief. "Marianne Hine . . . Cincinnati FBI office. Ms. Swift, we were recently informed to expect an investigation team from your outfit."

"And we're it." Sandy nodded at the others. "Phyllis Newton . . . Belinda Winkler." Sandy's voice lowered in volume. "Victoria Applepound."

Hine looked the group over, her eyebrows rising a bit. "All . . . right," she slowly said. "I don't want to seem standoffish, Ms. Swift, and I hope you'll forgive me. But we've been informed of some recent . . . troubles . . . experienced by you and the people at Swift Enterprises. Frankly, I'm a little surprised to see you here."

I'll just bet, Sandy thought, but decided to swallow the small desire to climb onto an attitude. "We've been having some problems, Agent Hine," she admitted, ignoring the

slight choking noises coming from behind her, "but it was decided to proceed with our involvement."

Hine gave Sandy's companions another look over, then turned to nod at a man who was approaching the atomicar. "This is Bryan Dahl. He's the manager in charge of the warehouse."

Sandy moved to shake hands with Dahl: a balding man dressed in casual clothes and wearing the look of someone who hadn't slept in a while. "Mister Dahl."

"Miz Swift. Appreciate you and your team coming down here."

"Understand that we're not here to assume any sort of control or influence over the investigation," Sandy said to Dahl and Hine. "I don't know all of what you've been told, but this sort of thing has been happening over in Europe, and it looks as if it's spreading over to here."

Hine nodded.

"What exactly do you need?" Dahl asked.

"My brother is mainly requesting samples of the damaged wall for closer examination in his laboratory," Sandy explained. "We're wanting to determine just what sort of force struck the warehouse, and this is the first chance we've had to acquire some recent material for study."

Dahl nodded again. "We've been working to take samples back to Quantico for analysis. Our own team got held up by some local bad weather."

Sandy stared at the nearby damage, then turned to her companions. "Tom and Bud brought an atomicar outfitted with medical support gear," she said in a low voice. "They obviously intended for it to take our delicate selves back to Shopton, but we can still get some use out of the equipment. Let's all get some specimen sample containers. And there should also be some portable chemical/biological/radiation monitors. Ah-hhhhhh . . . Mrs. Applepound."

The author had been whispering into her computer, but looked up brightly. "Yes?"

"I'd like for you to handle the monitor, please."

Mrs. Applepound looked like a five-year-old presented with her first puppy. "Oh!"

"Nothing complicated," Sandy explained. "Just wander around and point the monitor at the damaged parts."

"And what if an alarm goes off?" Phyllis asked.

"Then Mrs. Applepound screams and starts running back towards the atomicar."

"I would never flinch in the face of fearsome danger," Mrs. Applepound firmly declared.

"Then you'd be by yourself because, frankly, I'd advise all of us to hightail it back to safety if the monitor sounds an alarm. C'mon."

"'Racing only scant steps ahead of a lethal threat'," Mrs. Applepound murmured to the computer. "'The slightest mistake resulting in naught but an embrace from the arms of Certain Doom'."

"How does she do that?" Bingo murmured to the others.

"Do what?" Sandy asked, entering the rear section of the atomicar.

"Talk in capital letters like that?"

Shaking her head, Sandy passed out gloves and specimen containers to Phyllis and Bingo. She then took a portable monitor and, making adjustments to the device, passed it over to Mrs. Applepound after pointing out to the older woman how it worked.

Moving past the police barricades, Sandy found herself flanked by Hine and Dahl. "Mr. Dahl, I understand this warehouse was used to store phosphates."

Dahl nodded, stepping around a temporary work table. "Mainly our own locally manufactured brand of sodium tripolyphosphate."

"Ummmm." Reaching the edge of some debris, Sandy bent down and began selecting bits of metal, using tweezers to move the pieces into a specimen container. "Was anyone harmed when this happened?"

"There was a guard on duty when this happened," Dahl said. "We're still looking for him."

Sandy stared up at Dahl. "Oh?"

"Ronald Blue," Hine said, speaking up. "The truck he was using was found pushed up hard against the damaged wall. So far, though, we haven't located him. As near as we can tell, there's been no sign of anyone being injured. Blue's the only employee who's currently unaccounted for."

Sandy carefully looked around her, studying the entire scene. "Mister Dahl, your warehouse was hit by something powerful enough to tear through the wall," she pointed out. "But none of the other buildings in the area seem to be affected."

"That's just one of the weird things about this," Dahl said.

Straightening up, Sandy sealed her specimen container. Wiping her hands on her trousers she reached for her Snooper, opening it up to its camera setting and slowly letting its lens look about and take a visual record.

"Is there anything special about Ronald Blue I should know?" she asked.

Silence for a few moments, and Sandy glanced over to see Dahl and Hine exchange a look. Then Hine spoke: "It might be nothing . . . yet . . . but Blue had a criminal record."

"Oh?"

"We hired him as part of a program with the state correctional system," Dahl explained. "There was nothing about the warehouse to attract any sort of real criminal activity, and Blue had been a model prisoner while incarcerated. We'd hired him two years ago and, so far, we'd never had any reason to be concerned."

"Right now we'd just be happy if we could somehow locate him," Hine said to Sandy. "One way or another."

"I can imagine," Sandy said, raising the Snooper to her eye and staring through it as she continued taking pictures.

Suddenly she froze and brought the camera back, focusing and zooming in on a section of the wall near what remained of a loading dock.

"Ohhhh," she slowly breathed. "Oh, I don't like it when things like this happen."

Hine frowned. "Pardon?"

"Sniper!"

Sandy suddenly found herself the recipient of a flying tackle, courtesy of Bingo, who had also shouted out the warning. The two girls tumbled roughly into the shattered ground of the debris field.

Still moving, Bingo tumbled herself free from Sandy and swept her own Snooper through the air in a broad arc. From the device sprayed a thick yellowish mist which suddenly hardened, forming a thin, curving wall of lemon-colored material.

As Sandy watched, the wall shook several times as hard impacts struck it from the other side, causing cracks to appear in the material.

In the meantime, Marianne Hine had dropped to one knee, drawing a pistol from the inside of her jacket and opening fire on something far away. Sandy noticed that several of the nearby policemen had also drawn their service guns and were also shooting. Further away, Phyllis had dropped to the ground and was now raising her face, wide-eyed.

Looking about, Sandy spotted Mrs. Applepound . . . still standing, also wide-eyed and her arms at her side. A moment, and then the woman had brought her computer up to her lips and was murmuring into it.

Sandy took a breath. "Okay---"

"I was looking over at the spectators beyond the barricades with my Snooper," Bingo explained, sitting up and brushing herself off. "I thought one of them was acting a little funny. Then I saw him produce the rifle and point it in our direction."

Hine and the police had stopped shooting, and Sandy brought herself back up to her feet.

"Boss---," Bingo began.

Sandy waved her away, stepping out from behind the thin yellow shield and heading for Hine. The FBI agent was shouting to the police. "He may be heading towards 95. Try and get one of the choppers to follow." Hine then turned to Sandy. "He jumped into a car and sped off. Are you all right?"

Sandy nodded. "Except for being hammered at the goal line, I'm aces."

Bingo winced. "Sorry." She then turned to Hine. "If I can interface my Snooper with your computers, I can upload some close-ups I got of the gunman."

"I can show you how to do that," Sandy explained, moving back to the thin yellow barrier Bingo had thrown up. She gingerly touched it. "Bingo, what in the heck---"

"Something Tom talked about some time back," Bingo explained. "You know the sticky glop the Snooper can fire at muggers and stuff?"

"Yeah. This is it?"

Bingo nodded. "Tom was gonna to do some experiments. He felt that, if the glop was simply sprayed into the air, it'd harden and form a temporary shield that'd stop bullets." She let out a breath. "I guess I can tell him his theory worked."

Hine was also touching the shield. A thoughtful expression was on her face, and Sandy speculated that a future product line for Enterprises might soon come into being.

Phyllis now came closer, followed by Mrs. Applepound. "Just what the heck was that?" Phyllis asked.

"Love tap," Sandy muttered, rubbing the part of her arm that had struck the ground hard when Bingo made her saving tackle. "Just a reminder that our friends are playing for keeps. Mrs. Applepound? You okay?"

The woman considered the question. "Well, admittedly your life is somewhat more erratic than the way I depicted it in *Sandra Swift & The Prom Date From Jupiter*."

"For which I give thanks."

"Pardon?"

Sandy shook her head. "Agent Hine, we've got medical gear in our atomicar in case anyone here needs serious treatment."

Hine had been talking to a police officer, but turned back to Sandy. "We're all fine. It seems that you were the intended target."

"Imagine my surprise," Sandy said drily. "Well . . . in any case, if you come to the atomicar we can get you a copy of the images from Bingo's Snooper. Did everyone get samples?"

Phyllis and Bingo held up their containers. Mrs. Applepound waved the monitor.

Sandy nodded, "Good." She began walking back towards the atomicar. "As soon as I make a copy of Bingo's pictures for Agent Hine, we're heading home."

Phyllis picked up her steps to catch up with Sandy. "We haven't really spent all that much time here. Do we have all we need?"

"Oh yes." Sandy frowned darkly at her own Snooper. Gripped it tightly. "Oh yes!"

Chapter Nine: The Navel Of The World.

Sherman Ames was among the people waiting at one of the Swift Enterprises landing pads as the atomicar settled in for a landing. The sun had long since set.

"You've had a busy day," he remarked as Sandy climbed out.

"From toil he wins his spirit light'," Sandy replied tersely. "'From busy day the peaceful night'."

"Rich from the very want of wealth'," Bingo continued. "'In Heaven's best treasures: peace and health'."

Everyone looked at her.

"I sorta read a lot while waitin' for soufflés to rise," she explained.

Sherman briskly fell into step alongside Sandy as she led the group towards the Administration Building. "Updates," Sandy said. "Any word?"

"Nothing good," sighed Sherman. "The job was definitely a professional one. Whoever grabbed your Mom and the others didn't leave any immediate traces."

"No ransom demands? No contact?"

"None."

"Okay," Sandy nodded mournfully as she entered the building, "Right. Sherman . . . new priority assignment. Find out everything you can on a Ronald Blue. He was a night watchman at the Hamilton Chemicals warehouse that got hit. So far he's turned up missing, and I'm willing to bet there's more to this than just getting caught in the crossfire. And speaking of crossfire, did you get the images Bingo took of the sniper at Port Union?"

"I did," Sherman said. "And I also lost five years of life watching you dodging bullets."

"It wasn't my intention to get shot at---"

"Still, this tells us that our opponents are definitely playing for keeps here. Oh, and Bingo?" Sherman turned towards the Texan. "Little Lady, I don't care if you're dating Ken Horton. I'm gonna buy you a beer."

Bingo smiled and curtsied.

"Anything yet on the sniper?" Sandy asked.

Sherman shook his head. "Analysis is still washing the images. I'm also in contact with Cincinnati FBI and we're comparing notes. If necessary, we'll call in the Pierce Library."

"Consider it necessary, Sherman."

Sherman nodded. "OK, I'll get in touch with Austin. Call me paranoid, Sandy, but it seems as if you're becoming the primary target in all of this."

"Oh?"

"Consider this. Your brother and Bud were laid up unconscious in Orrville. Totally vulnerable. And yet you were the one who was attacked."

Sandy sighed. "Yeah. Ah-hhh . . . how's Dad?"

Sherman's expression fell. "We've sort of tranquilized him."

Sandy stopped to stare into his face.

"He's been under a lot of stress since your Mom was taken," Sherman explained. "Dr. Emerson suggested your father be given some medication and put to bed. He and some of my people are at your house now, keeping an eye on him."

With a low breath that was almost a whimper, Sandy went to the wall and leaned her forehead against it, closing her eyes.

Sherman moved up to her. "Sandy---"

"I want these people, Sherman," Sandy declared. "I want my Mom back, safe and sound."

"We'll get her back," Sherman replied steadily. He gently laid a hand on her shoulder. "I promise."

A few moments passed, and then Sandy opened her eyes. "Where's Herr Nospe?"

"Um, he's up in the Conference Room, taking some calls. I think he's been contacting his relatives."

Sandy nodded. "I need to go talk to him right now." She started moving towards the elevator.

"Sandy?" Phyllis said bleakly. "I gotta go to my Dad."

"Oh! Yeah, right. Give him a hug from me, Phyllis."

Nodding, Phyllis turned to go. Sherman also departed, mumbling instructions into the audio pickup which always accompanied him. With Bingo and Mrs. Applepound following, Sandy rode an elevator up to the top floor of the building, heading for the Conference Room located between the offices used by her father and brother.

As Sherman had said, Nospe was sitting alone at the broad table, talking low into the communications system. He paused, looking up as the women entered, and Sandy was immediately struck at how much the man had seemed to age.

But she kept her mouth thinned into a line, her hand tightly gripping her Snooper. Glancing over her shoulder she spoke to Bingo and Mrs. Applepound. "I need to talk to Herr Nospe alone for a bit."

"Oh," replied Bingo. "Yeah. I guess Mrs. A and I can go make some fresh coffee or something."

"Do that."

With a curious look directed at Sandy, Bingo lightly touched Mrs. Applepound's sleeve, and the two of them wandered on down the hall towards the small kitchen Bingo maintained in the building.

Sandy closed the door to the Conference Room.

Nospe was still looking at her. "Sandra---"

"I'm sorry for what's happened, Herr Nospe," Sandy said, slowly moving around the table.

"It is all my fault," Nospe replied, his voice shaking a bit. "I involved your family in all of this."

Sandy crossed her arms. "You might be right, but I don't think that's all you mean."

Nospe blinked in mild surprise. "What?"

Sandy sighed. "Herr Nospe, I've got a serious problem here. A year ago a lot of bad things happened down in Ecuador because I was mistrusting you. I made mistakes then, and I'm worrying about making the same mistakes now."

Nospe frowned quizzically. "I'm not certain I understand---"

"Look," Sandy said, raising her Snooper and unfolding it so that the camera lens was revealed. She turned the barrel to the "project" setting. "In Port Union I was carefully examining the warehouse."

"Ja."

"I saw something which I suspect everyone else there would've missed. Specifically, this item I found scratched onto a wall of the warehouse near where the

attack had been the strongest." Turning slightly, Sandy switched on the Snooper, throwing an image onto the near wall.

Nospe looked at the image and inhaled sharply.

"Yes," agreed Sandy. "The egg shaped oval with the indentation at the top, and a star above it. It's a modern artistic representation of what's been called 'the navel of the world'." Sandy's voice sharpened. "The Greek name for it is 'omphalos' . . . isn't it, Herr Nospe?"

"Sandy---"

"To be specific, this is the logo for Section Omphalos." With a single, angry gesture, Sandy closed her Snooper. "I think, Herr Nospe, you might have some explaining to do."

Nospe was shaking his head. "Sandy . . . Sandy . . ."

"Section Omphalos would have sufficient reason to dislike my family in general . . . and me in particular . . . after what happened in Ecuador. And now I find the organization's symbol at a place I was personally investigating." Sandy moved closer to Nospe, her expression hot. "Is Omphalos behind these attacks?"

Temperatures were slowly rising on Nospe's expression as well. "You think I would've arranged all this, Sandy?"

"I don't know---"

"Including the kidnapping of my own wife?"

The comment struck Sandy hard. "I . . . don't think so, Herr Nospe. But consider this from my point of view."

"I am." Nospe was trying to bring himself back under control. "Believe me, I am."

"When we were talking earlier, you weren't quite clear in explaining the relationship you currently have with Section Omphalos," Sandy pointed out.

Nospe nodded. "Yes. Correct." Settling down into a chair he collected himself. "After what happened in Ecuador it was agreed, at the higher levels of the organization, that you had been right in saying it was foolish for us to try and use secret tactics to acquire information concerning the extraterrestrials which Swift Enterprises were in regular contact with."

Sandy took a chair near Nospe.

"Since then, of course, Enterprises has followed a more open door policy with the European SETI interests."

"Yes, I've met Father Nichols from the Vatican Observatory Research Group."

"Ahh, yes."

"But my question is: are there elements still within Section Omphalos which might harbor resentment against Enterprises? Enough resentment to kidnap my Mom?"

"And Téa," Nospe added, musing. "And, of course, what links do they have to the attacks in Europe and here?"

"Because it's beginning to sound as if a link exists," Sandy pointed out. "I'm believing that your wife, my Mom and Aunt Helen were taken to try and throw Enterprises off the investigation. Same with the missile attack and the sniper in Port Union."

Nospe was staring thoughtfully at the top of the broad conference table. "Logically," he slowly said, "there should be no connection between the attacks and Section Omphalos. As I said, Sandy, the organization has made peace with Enterprises."

"Which is one reason I didn't want other people to hear this conversation," Sandy replied. "I didn't want to make accusations until I was firmly sure."

Nospe raised his head to look at her. "Then I can assume you're considering me to be innocent?"

Sandy sighed, sitting back in her chair. "I don't think you'd want Mom to come to any harm. But I had to know not only the level of your involvement with Section Omphalos, but also if there were violent factions present within the group."

Nospe ran a hand through his short hair. "An interesting idea," he conceded. "What I can do, Sandy, is contact some of the members of the Administrative Council for Section Omphalos." He thought for a moment. "Gustav is supposed to be attending an IAA conference in Stockholm, but I can try and reach him."

Sandy gave him a look of gratitude.

"In the meantime," Nospe softly said, "I think you should go to your father."

"Yeah, but I wanted to get this matter off my chest." Sandy stood up. "This business started out being complicated, and now it's getting worse."

Nospe almost smiled. "Just like old times."

"God, I hope not. I'm still recovering from Ecuador." Giving an idle wave to Nospe, Sandy left the Conference Room.

Almost immediately her progress was blocked by an arm pressed against the wall. "Oh, hello Bud . . . Bud!"

Bud leaned close. "Little Girl . . . that was a very very dirty trick you pulled."

Beyond him, Sandy barely made out Tom standing in the corridor, an equally severe look on his face. But Bud was the immediate problem. "I ah . . . I just wanted the two of you out of harm's way while I carried out my investigation in Port Union."

Bud's face moved closer. "Pull the other one."

"It's the truth," Sandy said, suddenly feeling very small. "Phyllis and Bingo and I---"

"And Mrs. Applepound," Bud added.

"And Mrs. Applepound," Sandy echoed. "Yeah, her. We were already out in the open and exposed. You guys were still under the radar, so to speak. I was just making certain you'd stay that way."

"You also thought that, if you had asked us to let you go on to Port Union and check out the warehouse, we'd say no."

"Well . . . yeah."

"Well maybe Tom and I would've said yes."

"Well, the clock was ticking, and I didn't think we had time to experiment." Her eyes still on Bud, Sandy reached down to the pouch hanging from her belt. "Tom? Tom, here're the samples we took from the warehouse. Metal, glass, soil, rock."

Tom's expression shifted from sullen calm to Standard Scientific Curiosity and he eagerly came forward. "Ah! You used the sample containers in the atomicar."

"Yeah, and this monitor's got radiological readings." From her belt Sandy now unclipped the monitor Mrs. Applepound had used in Port Union.

Tom accepted them both. "Great. Thanks, San."

Bud looked at him. "You're not letting them off the hook because of that, are you?"

"It's hard data," Tom said plaintively. "We need it."

Bud growled.

"We can deal with Sandy and Phyllis later."

"Yeah," Sandy said, nodding. "You can deal with us later." Just give me enough time to slip into something clinging and distracting, and apply a few strategic dabs of Eau De Desperate Girlfriend, she silently added.

Bud sighed, looking down. Then he gave Sandy another hard stare.

"OK," he said, moving even closer. His lips were almost touching hers. "We'll talk about this later."

"Oh of course, Bud," Sandy replied in what she hoped was a low and attractive singsong. "Whatever you wish."

* * * * *

Back in the Conference Room, Nospe was silently rolling over in his mind the conversation he'd had with Sandy. So lost was he in thought that it took a few moments before he heard the buzzer from the table's communication system.

Idly touching the button, he was surprised to hear Sherman Ames' voice. "Conference. Is Sandy there?"

"No, Herr Ames. Sandy has left to be with her father."

"OK. I just wanted her to know we've made some early progress on Ronald Blue. It turns out there was more to him than what a lot of people thought."

Nospe had no idea as to who Sherman was talking about, but his interest was piqued. "May I be told about this development, Herr Ames?"

"Sure. I'll throw it up on the big screen there."

Nospe turned towards the room's central video display. It came on, showing a black and white image of a man's face. Alongside it was a slowly scrolling field of information.

But Nospe's eyes widened at the sight of the man's face.

"Nein!" he cried out. "Es ist unmöglich!"

Chapter Ten: The Wind From The Past.

Sandy had almost reached the elevator . . . following Tom and Bud and silently practicing her Contrite Girlfriend Routine . . . when she heard her name being called. Turning with the others, she saw Nospe excitedly moving towards her.

"Zurückgekommen bitte," he was saying. "Bitte."

By the time Sandy had mentally translated his words into a request to follow, Tom and Bud were already accompanying him back to the Conference Room. Picking up her pace, Sandy quickly caught up.

She reached the Conference Room, her eyes immediately drawn to an image of an elderly man on the main display. Nearby, Nospe was bent over the communications panel. "Please repeat yourself, Herr Ames."

"Well, the picture on your screen is that of Ronald Blue," Sherman's voice announced from the speaker. "Our missing warehouse employee. But it now turns out that his personal records might possibly be false. Not only are we getting flags from the Pierce Library, but Blue's description matches that of a man who had spent six years in the Southeastern Correctional Institution in Lancaster for fraud."

Nospe was shaking his head. "Herr Ames, the man you are showing is not Ronald Blue. Or, rather, it's close. His real name is Roland Blau."

Tom's eyes suddenly widened. "'Blau'! The German word for 'blue'."

"Please go on, Mister Nospe," Sherman's voice said. "I'm recording everything."

"Roland Blau was something of a notorious thief in Germany years ago," Nospe explained. "If you check with both INTERPOL and Europol then I suspect you'll clear up quite a few of your questions."

"A notorious German thief," Sandy murmured, studying Blau's image on the screen, "and he turns up as a former con holding down a job at an Ohio warehouse?"

"Blau was enjoying a remarkable career in Germany," Nospe explained. "Then, all of a sudden, he disappeared."

Looking down from the screen, Sandy narrowed her eyes at Nospe. "For someone who you haven't seen in over six years, you certainly seem to know an awful lot about this fellow."

Nospe nodded again. "Ja," he said. Then he sighed. "Und you're correct, Sandy. Before Blau was a criminal, he was a Professor of Engineering at the Karlsruhe Institute of Technology."

In perfect unison, Sandy, Bud and Tom's jaws all fell open.

"Come again?" asked Bud.

"He mentored me in electronics," Nospe continued softly, staring at the screen.

Bud let out a low whistle.

"OK," Sandy said. "So let me see if I've got this straight. We have a series of attacks in Europe. Warehouses and such are being smashed open by a mysterious force. We finally have such an attack happen over here . . . and, so far, the only person missing from this just happens to be a former convict who was also one of your teachers."

"I can see where you're going with this," Nospe said, turning to her.

"And I don't want to," Sandy said. "Really."

Tom and Bud looked from one to the other. "Did we come in late on something?" Tom asked.

"I'll tell you later," Sandy said. "Maybe." She turned back to Nospe. "It's all circumstantial," she told him. "Admittedly a great big wagon load of Circumstantial that's blocking the mental highway, but I'm forcing myself to wait until we have more information before making anymore accusations out loud."

"Thank you," Nospe murmured. "The problem is, we're still very much in the dark."

"Perhaps not for much longer," Tom said, slowly raising the bag of samples Sandy had given him, holding it out for Nospe to see.

* * * * *

Sandy gently knocked at the doorway. "Anyone home?"

From his bed, Tom Sr. looked up, allowing a thin smile to slowly stretch across his face. "Hey, Young Lady."

Entering the darkened room, Sandy moved to her father's side and flowed up against him, hugging him tight. His arms rose to return the gesture, and Sandy's heart threatened to break as she felt only a fraction of the familiar strength.

"How's my fella?" she whispered.

"Your father's doing fair," Tom Sr. remarked, patting his daughter on the back. "Your fella is probably still mad at you for zapping him, as well as your brother."

"Ohhhh." Leaning back a bit, Sandy ruffled her father's short hair. "You know you're my Number One Fella."

The smile on Tom Sr.'s face stretched out just a fraction wider. "Liar."

"Well . . . we'll argue the point some other time."

"I'm just glad to see that you're back safe and sound." He let out a sigh. "All my children back, safe."

Sandy stared into his eyes. "We'll get her back, Dad. I promise."

"Yeah. I just wish. I wish I've . . ." His eyes began wandering about the room. "I've just never been much good when your Mom was in danger."

Sandy considered it. "Actually, Mom told me you were a tiger whenever she happened to run into trouble."

Tom Sr. choked on a mild laugh. "Well, the tiger's rather old and decrepit right now." His expression focused on her again, his eyes hardening. "I would feel better if I just knew what they wanted. There's been no note. Nothing."

"We know what they want," Sandy replied. "The same thing they wanted when they tried to shoot me down." She didn't bring up the subject of the sniper, and quietly hoped no one had told her father about it. "They want to throw us off of this investigation. That's why they also grabbed Frau Nospe."

"They feel we're that much of a threat?"

Sandy shrugged. "Apparently. Right now, though, Tom has the samples we took from the warehouse attack in Port Union and is examining them now. And Herr Nospe's come up with an interesting bit of information." Sandy explained about the connection between Nospe and Roland Blau.

Some of the uncertainty left Tom Sr.'s face. "Sooo," he breathed. "A personal angle possibly exists."

"And Sherman's jumping on it right now." Sandy patted her father's hand. "We're all working on it."

"Ummmm. I suppose it's foolish to ask that you be careful."

"You know me. I'm the very soul of caution . . . Dad! Do you need some water?"

"No, I'm okay," he said, controlling his choking. "Actually, truth be told, I'm getting the best of care."

"That's good."

"In fact, Mrs. Applepound has offered to read me some chapters from an unpublished work of hers: Sandra Swift And The Used Car Salesman Of Bronze."

"Frankly, I think you've suffered enough."

* * * * *

"Answer a question," Sandy asked as she walked up.

Her brother looked up at her. "Sure."

"Have you slept any?"

Tom shrugged. "A bit. I'm good."

She had just found Tom in the Materials Science Laboratory at Enterprises. Tom was sitting before the master computer which controlled several of the machines in the room. Along with Tom was Bud and Nospe.

It was early the following morning. Glancing at the computer screen, Sandy saw that Tom had several experiments going under the "Forensic Engineering" subroutines.

Pulling over a lab stool she perched near Bud, giving him a shy smile. The expression was neutrally returned for a few moments, and then Bud let his face relax, his hand reaching out to take hers.

Sandy felt herself relaxing and turned her attention to Tom. "So what've you found out, Maestro?"

Tom was staring at some numbers being produced by the computer. "I'm afraid it's nothing good," he said.

"Well, somehow I didn't think we were going to end up dancing through the lilies as a result of all of this."

Tom didn't answer for a few moments. When he finally spoke, he kept watching the numbers slowly scroll before him.

"I've been looking again and again at that footage which Professor Nospe brought over. The warehouse attack at Hamburg."

"We just got here ourselves," Bud softly explained to Sandy, "so we're all hearing it at the same time."

"Steel and concrete," Tom remarked, half to himself. "Smashed and torn apart as if it were paper. The contents of the warehouses thrown around as if . . ."

"In a storm," Bud suggested.

Tom stared at him for a few moments, then turned back to the computer. "I kept looking at it and asked myself that, if I wanted to produce that same sort of effect, how would I go about it?"

"One of your repelatrns," Nospe suggested.

Tom shook his head. "Too risky. Too bulky. And it'd leave one heck of a whopping big radiation signature."

Sandy was studying her brother`s face. "You've figured something out," she said.

"I think so," Tom replied, rubbing tiredly at his forehead. "And a lot of it is thanks to you."

"Oh?"

"Or, rather, the reports you brought back with you from Ohio. That FBI agent who was there. Marianne Hine. Something she'd said kept rolling around in my mind. The business about her official team having been held up in its investigation due to bad weather occurring in the area." Tom looked at the others. "I went back and checked. There was no bad weather in the area. Nothing . . . except for a brief report of concentrated winds north of Cincinnati which occurred around the estimated time of the attack."

"Concentrated winds?"

Tom nodded. "I went back and checked what information I could pull from all meteorological sources in and around Port Union. A few recording stations picked up what seemed at first to be an area of intense cyclonic activity."

"I hear a `but' coming."

"And you're about to get it. The readings were dismissed for two reasons. One: there was nothing in the area's weather pattern to suggest that tornados were forming."

"And the next one's going to be even more interesting," Bud murmured.

"Yeah," replied Tom. "And two: the recording stations were reporting that the activity was in the form of four separate cyclones . . . all of them traveling in a tight formation."

Bud's mouth drifted open.

Sandy's followed suit. "Oh . . ."

"Mein Gott," whispered Nospe.

"Given these results, the readings were naturally dismissed," Tom explained. "But then how to explain the rough weather Hine's team encountered?"

"I then had a brainstorm and went back over all the information concerning the European attacks." Tom's eyes went to Nospe. "There was one connection you and your investigators apparently didn't pick up on, Professor. Namely: the fact that at every attack there was also a report of brief and intense weather."

"Tom . . ." began Nospe.

Bud was matching his stare. "Are you talking about wind?"

"Not just wind," Tom declared. "Not just air. I'm talking about air intensified to the level of a tornado. Cyclonic winds. Something on the level of an EF5 on the Enhanced Fujita Scale. Wind powerful enough to smash metal and twist buildings. And that's just on a naturally occurring basis. If such power is somehow concentrated. Somehow focused . . ."

He turned to the machines he'd been controlling. "I've studied the samples brought back from Ohio. Fragments of concrete pulverized. Bits of metal which had been torn apart. If I follow the theory of some sort of super-cyclone, then that gives me the answer I've been looking for. The sort of force necessary to accomplish what's been happening."

Sandy was trying to take it all in. "But how . . . who . . ."

Tom's expression became darker. "That, unfortunately, answers one of the mysteries Professor Nospe brought with him."

Nospe frowned. "Oh?"

Tom nodded. "You'd mentioned how two of the attacks involved archives of the Deutsches Museum. You said members of the Museum staff were still checking to determine what had been stolen. I'm pretty sure I can help them in their search."

"You see, once I figured out what I was looking for, I fed all the facts into the computer and asked for an extrapolation." Tom sighed. "The computer suggested I contact the Deutsches Museum. Specifically: the vaults holding the Reich Technologische Und Wissenschaftliche Archiv. The documents associated with scientific and technological research carried out by the Nazis during World War II."

Chapter Eleven: Changing Weather.

To Sandy's eyes it was admittedly an ugly piece of machinery. The grainy photograph showed what seemed to be a cross between a fallen smokestack and a refinery flare tower. The top portion had been radically bent, and the entire piece of work was mounted on some sort of outdoor test stand, or perhaps it was a large rail car.

"So that's it," she said.

Next to her, Tom nodded. "One of the few existing photographs of what the Nazis referred to as their Windkanone. Literally: 'Wind Cannon'."

On Sandy's other side, Bud leaned closer to the table where Tom had laid the photograph. "As I recall, it never actually worked as it was designed to do."

"True," Tom nodded. He looked up at Nospe who had followed Tom and the others into the Enterprises Library. "Was that correct, Professor?"

Nospe sighed, closing his eyes briefly. "First off, Tom, I was born a decade after World War Two. In the second place, I never admitted to being an authority on Nazi weapons. In the third place, despite my German background---"

"I'm sorry," Tom said quickly, his face reddening. "I thought that maybe, given the fact that you seem to move in German and European intelligence circles, you might have heard something we Westerners haven't."

Nospe was silent for a moment. Then: "Apology accepted. I think we're all a bit on edge here. But, as far as I am aware, der Windkanone was never successfully employed."

Sandy touched the photograph, turning it more towards her. "So exactly how was this gizmo supposed to work?"

Tom folded his arms. "Well, as I understand the principle, hydrogen and oxygen were mixed and ignited at the molecular level. The result was supposed to be a 'shell' composed of compressed air and water vapor. From what I heard, the cannon barely had a range of a few hundred meters."

"In other words, nothing to make it much an improvement over conventional artillery," Bud murmured.

"True."

"But wasn't there something else? Something that was supposed to actually create a tornado?"

Tom's forehead creased in thought. "There was something . . ."

"I believe it was called Der Turbulenzgewehr," Nospe said, looking up from the picture at Tom. "'The Vortex Gun'."

"That's right," Tom replied, nodding. "Now I remember. It was designed to create artificial tornados which would've knocked attacking aircraft out of the sky. Like the Wind Cannon this was also given some field tests but, as before, nothing useful came out of it."

"Back then," Bud gently pointed out.

"It would seem," Nospe slowly said, "that someone has somehow produced an improved working design."

"In spades," agreed Tom.

"So," Sandy asked. "Where do we go from here?"

Tom straightened up, staring down at the photo. "Well . . . now we've got a firm suspicion of how the attacks are being performed. Given the background, we can work to try and determine who's been improving on Nazi technology."

"And why," added Bud.

Sandy had been thinking quietly, and now she nodded to herself. "Well, I'm gonna see how Phyl's doing and check on some things around here. I've got my Snooper with me in case anything new comes up and you need to get in touch."

Tom nodded idly, leafing through some documents he had placed alongside the photograph. Bud gave Sandy a quick hug, then rejoined Tom at the table, leaving Nospe as the only one who watched Sandy leave the room, his face hiding memories. The younger Swift, and Bud Barclay, he considered to be both estimable gentlemen. But they still had an unconscious habit of dismissing Sandy as being nothing more than a little girl. Watching her leave, Nospe recalled seeing the "little girl" in action, and mentally suspected that there were other storms brewing besides the one their unknown enemies were producing.

* * * * *

Sandy met Phyllis coming out of the elevator. "Hi."

Phyllis nodded, and Sandy suspected her friend had slept little. Moving closer, she delivered a hug. "How's your Dad?"

"He's . . . moping around," Phyllis said. "He's been trying to buck up and stay busy, but Mr. Rajiv finally had him go home before he set the place on fire."

"I'd have thought some work would've been just the sort of thing Uncle Ned needed."

"You're right," Phyllis agreed, "and Mr. Rajiv sent Dad home with the thrust reverser production schedule for the new Flying Lab. That'll keep Dad busy and out of everyone's hair until we . . . know something." She looked away.

"We're getting closer all the time," Sandy said and related to Phyllis what had recently been discovered. As she hoped, the news was enough to focus Phyllis out of her doldrums.

"Some sort of Nazi super weapon?"

"That's what it's starting to look like."

Phyllis' expression focused even more. "And you've got that look in your eyes that tells me we'll be dodging missiles again very soon."

"Maybe." Taking her friend by the arm, Sandy led her over to some nearby windows. "Tom and Bud and Herr Nospe are back there dissecting the whole business of the weapon's history," she explained quietly. "My head, on the other hand, is somewhere else."

"As usual."

Sandy felt her spirits rising at the sound of Phyllis' voice returning to its usual sense of sardonic teasing. "Do you remember what was in the warehouses which have been attacked so far?"

Phyllis frowned. "Lemme think. Ah-hhhh . . . electronic components. And turbine parts."

"Right," Sandy replied, nodding. "Now. What do you use those sort of things for?"

Phyllis' face became bleak. "Sandy, I'm in advertising and sales. Remember?"

"Yeah, okay. But this is one of the things that's been bothering me. The people who've grabbed our Moms already have a stealth weapon which can smash through solid walls. When you've got that, what the hell else do you need?"

Phyllis thought for a moment. "A retirement plan?"

Sandy stared at her.

"Okay, okay . . ."

"Somehow, the bad guys have managed to take a failed piece of World War II technology and upgrade it into a working design. This requires engineers. Someone with a brain had a nice little breakthrough. I'm wondering now if this same someone is on the verge of another breakthrough. An even worse one than this tornado weapon."

"And that's why they'd be out stealing all these other components."

"Exactly. Now . . . these people would also need some sort of home base. A place where they could develop and construct this weapon of theirs."

Phyllis considered it. "Makes sense."

"Hopefully the rest of this will as well. You and I can go do some research on where and how the Nazis originally developed their versions of this dingus. Find out exactly what they needed. We then look for similar facilities elsewhere---

---and maybe find out where our Moms are," Phyllis finished excitedly.

"Sounds like a plan?"

"Yes! And, for once, a fairly safe one. Some simple research. Just the two of us?"

"Well, Bingo should also be useful in this sort of thing."

"Hope so," Bingo said, walking up to them. "What'you got goin' here?"

"A plan to locate my Mom, Aunt Phyllis and Frau Nospe," Sandy replied. "And it'll involve you---

"Hel-LOOOOOOOO!"

Sandy sighed, "And, I guess, Mrs. Applepound as well. Hi, Mrs. A."

The author waddled over to the group. "I could just hear what you were talking about. Is it to be enemy missiles and lethal snipers once again?"

"Hopefully not," Sandy said, motioning for everyone to follow her in the direction of the office she kept on the floor. "With luck, this should involve nothing more than a few hours of serious computer investigation."

"Something occurs to me," Phyllis said.

"Um?"

"We're gonna be looking for the main base where the bad guys are operating from, right?"

Sandy nodded.

Mrs. Applepound clasped her hands together. "How thrilling. We'll be examining extinct tropical volcanoes then?"

"Well, not exactly," Phyllis replied, glancing back at her. "But I was thinking what we should also be doing is figuring out what the next target for attack will be. I mean, it shouldn't be all that difficult a job. So far, with the exception of this last one---"

"---which netted a former German thief," Sandy pointed out.

"---so far, whoever's been responsible for these attacks have been targeting warehouses filled with electronics and sophisticated machine parts. If we work hard enough at narrowing down what's already been stolen, we should be able to come up with a good idea of where they'll strike next. San? What`s wrong?"

Sandy had paused at the doorway to her office. "It's just the way you said that," she told Phyllis. "I mean, if I were the one organizing these attacks, I could think of one obvious place to attack."

* * * * *

Several floors beneath the control tower for the Enterprises airfield was the office which handled air traffic control for the area, as well as related weather.

One of the meteorologists on duty now leaned back slightly from his console. "That's odd."

His supervisor wandered over. "What's wrong?"

"It must be a glitch of some sort," the meteorologist said. "I mean, the sky's clear and everything. But, for a moment, I thought I was getting readings from over across Lake Carlopa."

"What sort of readings?"

"That's the funny part. It almost looked like a concentrated group of tornados. All of them moving in formation, and heading for us."

Chapter Twelve: Enterprises Attacked!

It was the operators up in the Enterprises control tower who first spotted the approach. "What in God's name . . ."

Certainly in their years of working with Swift Enterprises the men and women in the tower had seen many unusual sights. But this was to go down as the topper. East of Enterprises a formation of six spindle-shaped funnel clouds were rapidly skimming towards them across the blue expanse of Lake Carlopa. The water of the lake churned where the lower ends touched . . . the six cylindrical clouds weaving like cobras as they sped closer.

One of the tower operators had the sense to recover quickly, and he moved to slam a hand down on a large red button. The air became filled with a wailing siren.

But it was too late, and the roaring clouds had now reached the near edge of the lake. Then, suddenly, the clouds vanished to reveal six bizarre-looking aircraft. The two in the center were missile-shaped; each of them sporting bubble cockpits and air intakes at the forward end, and four swept fins surrounding the rear exhaust. Around the middle of each of the two aircraft circled a thick metal ring.

The four surrounding vehicles roughly resembled the preceding two, but there were no intakes or jet exhaust. And, instead of the central ring, the middle section of each craft was making the air ripple with the characteristic blur of high-speed rotors.

"Drones being launched," a voice announced over a loudspeaker. "Security copters being launched."

From several locations around Enterprises, robot surveillance drones shot into the air. From experience the control tower operators knew the drones were automatically configured for area denial maneuvers: their command heads designed to project debilitating electromagnetic pulses that could disable aircraft engines. All of this in the

event that Enterprises was to fall under direct attack. An event which no one had ever imagined could happen.

But it was happening now.

Elsewhere, from hangars at either end of the Enterprises airfield, Omnicopters were rising into the air. Between the landing legs were pods which also carried area denial projectors.

But the invading aircraft had not remained still and, as the drones and Omnicopters raced closer, the operators in the control tower could hear an increasingly loud howling coming from the strangers. A moment later, and the entire formation was now surrounded by a gigantic whirling funnel cloud.

The operators in the tower instinctively threw themselves onto the floor as, all around them, their world exploded.

* * * * *

Standing in her office, Sandy could clearly see the attack occurring from the windows. "Jesus!"

Next to her Phyllis gasped. "San---"

"Down," shrieked Sandy, grabbing Phyllis and dropping to the carpet. She had already seen the windows beginning to bulge ominously. A moment later and the air was split by a screaming roar, and Sandy could feel the edge of a high-speed cloud of Tomasite-reinforced glass pass overhead.

As carefully as possible she raised her head to the howling winds which were now filling the office. Outside, through what remained of the window panes, she could see the gigantic tornado edging further away from the Administration, slowly passing over the Enterprises complex. Wherever the lower end of the vortex touched, destruction was left behind. Sandy could already see several fires blazing around the airfield and fuel storage centers. The few storage tanks still intact were rapidly descending on hydraulic lifts down into armored bunkers.

Of the drones and Omnicopters there was no sight. And the Enterprises control tower now carried an ugly gash as if it had been raked by an enormous claw.

"C'mon," Sandy said, grabbing Phyllis by the elbow and moving to her feet. She tore her eyes away from the carnage outside to glance at her friend. "You okay?"

Phyllis managed to nod briefly. "Yeah, but---"

"We'll panic later," Sandy declared. "Let's go!"

Moving out into the hall, Sandy was relieved to note that Bingo had possessed the presence of mind to grab Mrs. Applepound and throw the older woman out of harm's way, the two of them having crouched for safety back in the corridor. The little Texan was straightening up. "Sandy, what---"

"Tom, Bud and Nospe," Sandy shouted, pointing back down the hall. "Check on them. Phyl, take Mrs. A and go with her." Not waiting to see if her orders were followed, Sandy raced to the doorway which led to the stairwell, her mind screaming at her to avoid the elevators altogether.

"Enterprises is under attack," the voice from the ceiling speakers was announcing. "Please move immediately to the protective shelters. Security has been alerted. Repeat: Enterprises is under attack . . ."

Entering the stairwell, Sandy ignored most of the steps, practically leaping down from one landing to the next. Even though the stairwell was securely built, she could still feel the shudder of an occasional explosion . . . the groaning of the Administration Building around her as it struggled against the storm outside.

Bursting out into the lobby she passed several fellow workers, ignoring them except to make certain none were seriously hurt and that all had managed to make use of available emergency equipment. She continued running, racing through the large double doors out into the open.

The winds had died down and she saw that the tornado had disappeared. In its place was the squadron of mystery aircraft. They were hovering high above the complex, the outer ring of aircraft high in the air while the two center vehicles began slowly descending.

Looking at them, Sandy felt something low and animal uncoil inside her body. Looking around she saw an emergency vehicle lying on its side nearby and immediately headed for it.

Yes! There in its holding cradle. Just what she needed. Quickly removing the metal container, Sandy placed it on the ground, breaking the metal seal. Opening the lid she spread it on the ground, then moved to place her feet on the indicated circles, switching the container on. With a whirl of motion a metal frame smoothly unfolded from the open container. Spreading her arms out, Sandy allowed the frame to quickly surround her body, letting the various components snap into place. In less than a minute she was fitted inside a Werewasp flight suit.

From either side of her expanded a ducted-fan propulsion wing. Reaching up, Sandy pulled the control helmet down over her head, then reached for the control arms

which were closing into place around her waist, the action causing the suit's power source to hum into life.

Reaching for the control grips, Sandy prepared to take off.

"San!"

She looked up to see Bud and Bingo running towards her.

"What the hell are you doing?" Bud was crying out.

"Not letting them get away," Sandy yelled back, and triggered the suit. With a howl of power the propulsion wings whirled to life, and Sandy rose rapidly into the air.

Okay, Hero, now what? Something inside her asked. Shaking the inner voice away, Sandy gritted her teeth and aimed herself at the attacking planes. The outer ring of planes remained where they were, their center rotors maintaining a constant altitude. Within their circle, and further down, the two other aircraft had lowered landing gear from their tail fins and were settling down near the wrecked remains of Enterprises warehouse area. One of them had already touched down, its cockpit open and someone climbing down its sleek hull. Twisting in the air, Sandy turned and began diving towards it.

She sensed the trouble before it actually happened. Or perhaps she felt the sudden change in air pressure. Suddenly the nearer of the guardian aircraft howled louder, and the air around it whirled to form a tornado.

Warning buzzers screamed in Sandy's ears, and she found herself struggling to keep the Werewasp under control. But the air around her became unyielding in its grip, and she found herself being slammed rapidly towards the ground.

At the last moment she pressed a special trigger located beneath the control grips. Explosive charges blew the propulsion arms away from the suit, and then Sandy found herself surrounded by a thick bubble of Duratherm landing foam. In the next second the air was knocked from her lungs as the bubble struck the ground, attempting to cushion the impact as much as possible and protect its precious cargo.

Choking, and feeling broken in several places, Sandy clawed away at the protective bubble, finally peeling the layers aside and spilling out onto the tarmac. Tasting blood . . . her nostrils filled with smoke and the scream of sirens in her ears . . . she slowly raised her head.

The mysterious aircraft stood on its tail some thirty or so meters away. Behind it could be seen the smoke and flames of several ravaged warehouses.

Its pilot was slowly approaching Sandy. Dressed from head to toe in a dark grey flying suit, the head totally enclosed within a shining helmet. Under one arm he carried a small metal cylinder.

In his other hand was a pistol. As Sandy watched helplessly, the pilot raised the pistol, pointing it directly at her. There was no way he could miss.

A pause, then the pilot slowly moved the pistol away. A few more moments, then he turned and began casually walking back to his aircraft.

Sandy felt her hands digging roughly into the surface of the tarmac. "You!" she shrieked.

The pilot stopped and turned back towards her.

Sandy's eyes blazed at the man. "Where . . . is . . . my . . . MOTHER?"

No response. The helmet gazed impassively at her for another few moments, then the pilot turned away and resumed walking back to his vehicle. As Sandy watched . . . bruised and bleeding and torn . . . the man climbed back into the strange ship, closing the cockpit around him. Soon there was a roar of power. Jet exhaust howled from beneath the tail. The sound of another engine joined from the thick metal ring around the plane's waist, and then the vehicle shot high into the air, joined by its companion. Accompanied by the others, the attacking squadron turned and swooped back towards Lake Carlopa, soon passing out of sight.

When Bud and Bingo arrived at the scene they found Sandy still crouched upon the ground; weeping bitterly and slamming at the tarmac with a bloody fist.

Chapter Thirteen: Countermove.

With both Swift Enterprises and the Swift Construction Company being major employers in the area, the staff at Shopton Hospital had long grown dependant upon both concerns for a good part of its business. Enterprises and the Construction Company maintained efficient on-site medical facilities, but Shopton Hospital still managed to take in some of the long-term cases, as well as the occasional special occurrence.

Never before, though, had an "occurrence" been as special as this. The smoke still rising over the ragged acreage of Enterprises served to punctuate the desperate atmosphere which currently surrounded the hospital. That and the armored vehicles and troops of the 2nd Battalion/108th Infantry of the New York National Guard which

occupied the immediate area. These were accompanied by Omnicopters and drones which had been sent over from the Swift launch center on Fearing Island; the aircraft sharing space with patrolling Hulse F-9s scrambled from the 174th National Guard Fighter Wing in Syracuse. No one apparently wanted to take further chances.

Sherman Ames stepped out of the elevator to the hospital's third floor, barely glancing at the Swift Security people who immediately snapped to attention. To his way of thinking, it wasn't necessary to check on the performance of his people. Things were either being done his way, or there'd be Hell to pay.

Striding down the hall, Sherman felt his hands bunching into fists.

Oh yes, he thought. There'll be Hell to pay!

Enterprises had completely taken over the third floor . . . the corridors and rooms filled with the injured who hadn't been transported on to facilities in Bath, Elmira, Ithaca or Hornell; the exception being the one room filled with portable command and communication equipment.

Sherman thought about the injured . . . about the others . . . and had trouble drawing a complete breath. He had been having difficulty with his breathing ever since the attack, and he supposed something could have struck him back then, but he told himself it was psychological. There was work to be done. Work, and the desire to feel his fingers closing around a certain neck.

All books would be balanced, he silently promised himself. All bills would be paid. With interest!

Turning a corner he entered the largest of the rooms on the floor, immediately coming to parade rest just within the doorway. From the examining table, Sandy looked up, giving Sherman something which wasn't quite a smile, but was not quite despair either.

Lord knows there was plenty of that to go around. Tom Sr., Ned Newton and Earhardt Nospe were in the room; their faces drawn and grey and looking far older than they actually were.

Next to the bed, Bingo Winkler had been sitting down. At Sherman's entrance, though, she stood up and crossed her arms, her stance managing to place her protectively between Sandra and the doorway. Perhaps consciously.

The look Bingo was giving Sherman was far from complimentary, and he was tempted to drag the little cook out into the hall to where they could argue privately and he could ask her what the hell else he could've done? He shook the thought away, giving a nod to Tom Jr., Bud and Phyllis: the trio standing near the doctor who was finishing bandaging up Sandy's shoulder.

"Go ahead, Sherman," Tom Sr. murmured.

Sherman took a breath, ignoring the twinge of pain. It was all psychological. “Sixty-seven injuries in all,” he reported. He took another careful breath. “Eight fatalities . . . and fifteen others still unaccounted for.”

Tom Sr.’s eyes closed, and his head dropped to his chest. His son came from behind and rested a hand on his shoulder.

“Most of the fires are under control,” Sherman continued. “We have all damage parties, including volunteers from the Army and Air Force, going through the wreckage and securing the area, as well as searching for those people who’re still missing. I’ve been told that all the fires should be out before nightfall. Damage was most extensive to the warehouses and storage vaults bordering Laboratory Row.”

Something sounding like labored breathing could be heard coming from the elder Swift, while the look on Tom Jr.’s face could’ve been carved from stone.

Looking at her brother and father, Sandy nodded at Sherman. “Go on.”

“I have taken several actions,” Sherman replied calmly. “First, and without waiting for permission, I’ve placed all other Swift facilities on full alert. The Construction Company, the Citadel, Fearing, SECFAR, Loonau . . . all our operatives are reporting increased levels of emergency readiness.”

Tom Jr. nodded once.

“I’ve contacted the Space Station. Commander Horton is assuming full control of all space assets under the current state of emergency. Mr. Bracknell on Fearing will be assuming authority for all airborne and seagoing assets.

“I’ve also been in contact with Washington, and they’re very concerned over what’s happened here. Corvin with Intelligence One has offered to activate File O-37.”

Tom Sr. slowly looked up. “Tell Corvin we appreciate the offer, but Benton has more than enough on his plate at the moment.”

“Yes sir,” Sherman replied. “I’ve taken the liberty, though, of accepting a minor offer and having some of our jetmarines and seacobpters transferred to Palm Key where the Doctor can watch over them for the duration.”

Tom Sr. nodded. “You’ve done well, Sherman.”

Sherman noticed that even Bingo’s expression had softened slightly.

“Continue with your work,” Tom Sr. continued. “Keep us informed, and especially if the missing people are located.” He sighed. “One way or another.”

Sherman turned and left.

“I expect he’ll get even less sleep than the rest of us,” Phyllis said.

“We’ll keep an eye on him,” Tom Jr. promised. “The last thing we need, and especially now, is to be making mistakes because we’re tired.”

“Vot haf you discovered, Tom?” Nospe asked.

Sandy wondered if she was the only one who noticed that Nospe’s accent had become more pronounced? She suspected that, when it came to lack of sleep, Nospe and her father and Uncle Ned were leading the pack.

She watched as her brother pulled out a Tiny Idiot computer, his fingers tapping on the screen. “One of the few things in our favor,” Tom muttered, “is that the security cameras at Enterprises continued to operate for quite a while during the attack.” He stopped and held out the computer for Sandy to see. “Are these the aircraft you saw?”

Sandy studied the image and nodded. “Both kinds.”

Bud had been leaning close, frowning at the little screen. “Tom, I’ve seen those designs before.”

“Yeah,” replied Tom. “It looks as if we’re encountering a common theme here. These planes are based on experimental designs the Nazis had been working on near the end of the second World War.”

“Oh no,” moaned Phyllis.

Nospe’s face darkened.

“Both of them are VTOL ‘tail-sitter’ designs,” Tom explained. “The aircraft which served as escorts were Focke-Wulf Fw *Triebflügels*. They carry ramjet-driven rotor blades which supply both lift and propulsion.

“The aircraft which actually landed seem to be variants of the Heinkel *Lerche* design. The center ring contains two contra-rotating propellers which provide lift and thrust, although the ones involved in the attack seemed to make use of jet propulsion as well.”

“Let me guess,” said Sandy. “Like the Wind Cannon, these designs also never made it past the design stage.”

“It would seem,” Tom replied, “that, once again, someone has gone to the trouble of resurrecting and advancing the designs.”

His father seemed to float out of his despair, his expression gradually becoming thoughtful. “Other than some obvious sort of symbolic relationship, Tom, why do you think anyone would be going to the trouble of resurrecting Nazi weapon designs?”

Tom was frowning down at the Tiny Idiot display. “What immediately comes to mind is the notion that a lot of these old designs weren’t wholly unworkable. Remember that the Nazis were already fielding operational jet aircraft and combat missiles late into the war. Had they possessed more time they could’ve conceivably won the war with a whole arsenal of advanced weapons.”

“There ist somethink else to consider,” Nospe added. “Although it pains me to admit this, the simple fact ist that the people committing these crimes are quite possibly Germans . . . and possibly possessing some sort of available access to Third Reich records which could’ve helped.”

“So how they whip up the tornados?” Bingo chirped.

“And how’d they manage to avoid being detected on radar until they were practically on us?” added Ned.

“Both of you beat me to those,” Sandy said.

“And what did they want here?” Tom considered.

Bud let out a brief, choking cough. “I’d of thought that’d have been obvious. They were here to beat the crap out of us.”

“But that wasn’t all,” Tom pointed out. “They also came for something specific. Sandy,” he said, turning to his sister, “this business of the pilot leaving with a cylinder. Do you have any idea what it was?”

Sandy worked to send her mind back. “I wasn’t in the best of all possible states,” she admitted. “But it seemed to be just over a foot long. Maybe a few inches wide. It didn’t look like a gas cylinder, or anything like that . . . ah! I remember now. There were green bands around one end of the cylinder. Three of them, I think.”

Tom exchanged looks with his father and Ned Newton. “That sounds like the markings I use for biological samples,” he said.

“Sherman said most of the damage was around Laboratory Row,” Tom Sr. pointed out. “The storage vaults.”

“The plane had landed fairly close to the Biology Section,” Sandy said. “The Microbiology Building and its storage annex were the nearest structures.”

Tom was staring off into space. “I don’t remember keeping any biological samples. But the green bands on a cylinder would mean . . . oh my God!” Tom’s face became pale.

“What?”

“I do have something in storage at Microbiology. The nanotech *e coli* I

developed to build the Photon with. Several cultures stored in self-contained capsules. I was getting some ready to send up to the space station.”

Tom Sr.’s eyes narrowed. “We’ll have to tell Sherman to go through the Microbiology inventory with a fine-toothed comb. See if that’s what’s missing.”

Tom was letting out a long breath. “On top of everything else,” he said, “and now they’ve also got my nanotech.”

“They’re vinting to upgrade their weapons,” Nospe suggested.

“Another nightmare to contend with.” Tom’s lower lip pushed out as he considered the problem. “Now let’s tackle some of the other questions raised. The tornados, for one. Admittedly I’m more of an engineer than a meteorologist. But we’re not completely in the dark. Fortunately for us, Ithaca Foger attacked Enterprises some time ago.”

Sandy’s eyes widened. “Tom, your sense of nostalgia---”

“What I mean is that, when she did, Sherman went to the trouble of modifying the security systems at Enterprises to record all sorts of energy and radiation signatures. Through the security camera footage we have here, I can now check and see if the main Damonscope array noticed anything interesting.” He began tapping on the little computer, cycling through a variety of displays.

A few moments later he paused, his eyebrows rising. “Huh!”

“What?” asked Bud.

“Microwaves,” Tom said.

“Microwaves?”

Tom looked up. “Masers.”

* * * * *

Shrugging her shoulder, trying to work the stiffness out of it, Sandy accepted the Tiny Idiot from Phyllis. “Thanks.”

Phyllis glanced back over her shoulder. “Did you notice how our dads sort of perked up when they got more involved into the mystery?”

Sandy nodded. “And I was hoping something like that would happen. Whenever they throw themselves into work they tend to get themselves together.”

Behind them, Bingo was shadowing their footsteps, almost treading on Sandy's heels. The three girls had left the examination room and were walking towards the relative privacy of the hospital's Intensive Care Unit waiting area.

"They're gonna be busy working on the problem of how the tornados were produced," Sandy said, reaching a large couch and sitting down on it.

Phyllis sat down next to her. "In the meantime?"

"In the meantime, I want to try and take a few steps further on." Sandy began tapping on the computer. "Bingo."

"Ayum?"

"Please sit down and stop slowly looking about in search of snipers, microwaves, Nazi weapons or whathaveyou. You're starting to make me nervous."

"Sorry," the Texan murmured sheepishly, moving to sit on the other side of Sandy, who couldn't help but notice that the girl continued to carefully watch over their surroundings.

Phyllis leaned closer, looking to see what Sandy was studying on the computer. "So what are we looking for?"

"I'd like to get more on the offensive . . . no snappy comebacks from the Peanut Gallery, please. With each attack we keep getting a bit more information. It's time to see if there's anything we can use to our advantage. Let me start this with a general question: can we agree that the planes which attacked us were the same ones responsible for the other attacks? Both in Ohio and in Europe?"

Phyllis looked across Sandy at Bingo, who eventually gave a cautious nod. "Let's go ahead and say yes," Phyllis replied.

"Well," Sandy commented, "presuming, for the moment, that I know something about aeronautical engineering . . ."

"Given," muttered Phyllis.

". . . none of the planes that attacked us looked as if they were able to make a trans-Atlantic jump."

Bingo's expression was wrapped around indecision. "Can you be sure of that?"

"Not entirely," Sandy confessed. "But let's work on the presumption that such is the case. Which brings up the next question: how did the planes arrive here?"

"Vertical take-off planes," considered Bingo. "They could've taken off from the surface of any ship."

“Assuming that they weren’t disassembled for the trip over here,” Phyllis pointed out. She suddenly straightened up a bit. “Oh . . . wait. That’s wrong.”

Sandy and Bingo looked at her.

“Whoever’s responsible for these attacks would want to keep the planes out of the hands and notice of Customs,” Phyllis pointed out. “If I were behind all of this I’d have the planes together and ready to go as soon as whatever delivered them was within range of America.”

Sandy considered it. “True.”

“A lotta conjecture here,” Bingo said.

“Yeah, but let’s play with it a bit and see if anything comes up. What, Phyl?”

Phyllis was shaking her head. “We’re forgetting something, Sandy. We’re presuming that the planes which made the Enterprises and Port Union attacks were the same ones doing the European attacks.”

Sandy nodded.

“According to Mr. Nospe, the most recent attack in Europe was six days ago. In northern Germany. It’d take a cargo ship an average of twenty days to travel from there to America.”

Sandy’s face fell. “Yeah.”

Bingo was frowning to herself. “Hold on a moment.”

The others looked at her.

“How come we’re presumin’ the attackin’ planes came over on a boat?”

Sandy and Phyllis looked at each other. “I guess,” Sandy carefully replied, “because you’d need something big enough to transport the planes over here.”

“Yeah, but ain’t there great big cargo carryin’ ---”

“*Planes*,” Sandy shrieked joyfully, the level of her voice catching the attention of everyone else in the area. Her fingertips pummeled on the Tiny Idiot. “Accessing Eurocontrol’s ATC database. Y’know . . . if you folded the rotors on those *Triebflügels* . . .”

Information began scrolling across the small screen. “No,” muttered Sandy, reading one item after the other. “No . . . no . . . no . . . no . . .”

She suddenly paused, her breath slowly inhaling and her eyes widening as she stared at the screen. “I wonder,” she whispered. “Now I just wonder.”

“What?” asked Phyllis.

“The bad guys already used an atomicar against us,” Sandy said, her eyes still on the screen. “So, along with using Nazi machinery, they’re not adverse to using our gear.”

“Yeah. And?”

“Three days ago I show two Pigeon Special Hannibal XTs departing from Europe to America.”

Phyllis shrugged. “We’ve sold quite a bit of them.”

“True,” Sandy said, “but consider the following. First, the planes aren’t listed as belonging with any of the major air carriers. Second, they departed without registering any cargo. They landed at JFK Airport in New York City equally empty. Third, their point of departure was Rostock-Laage Airport.”

“Ummm. Still reaching, Sandy.”

“Am I?” Sandy lifted the computer so that Phyllis could see the screen. “The planes were registered as hauling cargo for an outfit called ‘*Weltabel*’. Rough translation: ‘World Navel’.”

Bingo whistled low.

“Omphalos,” Sandy continued, her voice tightening. “Now . . . why does anyone go to the expense of having two large cargo jets fly empty across the Atlantic to just sit at JFK?”

“That look in your eyes,” Phyllis said, “tells me we’re going to go and find out.”

Sandy nodded. “Go get packed. Next stop: New York City.”

Chapter Fourteen: On The Trail.

Even with packing light, it was still the next morning before Sandra, Phyllis and Bingo managed to slip out of everyone’s sight and begin their journey.

“I tell ya,” muttered Bingo, “sneakin’ out just ain’t as easy as it used to be.”

The girls were walking as casually as possible, heading for the least damaged of the Enterprises vehicle garages, overnight bags slung under their shoulders. “Well,” Phyllis replied, “what with so many people *hors de combat*, we’ve all got extra work to do around here. Being honest about it, if I didn’t agree with Sandy that this was an

important trip, then I'd feel like a rat for running out."

"I don't really feel good about it myself," Sandy said. "But we've got this juicy piece of evidence being dangled before us, and it'd be stupid not to act on it."

Phyllis sighed. "I may regret playing Bad Cop here, but shouldn't we be passing our evidence on to the FBI office in New York City?"

Entering the garage, Sandy went to one of the nearby storage lockers, her fingers tapping out the access code on the lockpad.

"You'll notice her extended bouts of quiet in regards to certain questions," Phyllis said to Bingo.

"I heard you," Sandy said, peering through the contents of the locker and selecting certain items, dropping them into her bag. Both Bingo and Phyllis couldn't help but observe that the locker was marked FIELD SUPPORT GEAR (SURVEILLANCE/SECURITY --- RESTRICTED) and carried a label prominently pointing out that Enterprises Security was to be notified if the locker was accessed.

"To answer your question," Sandy said, "the FBI is good. The FBI is helpful, and it is my intention to call them in. Eventually. But, as good as the Bureau is, it's not equipped to handle international thugs in possession of revived Nazi super weapons."

Bingo blinked. "And we are?"

"I think that, after dealing with alien artifacts, rogue astronauts, killer cyborgs and runaway quantum physics, we're in a much better position than the Bureau to tackle a situation like this." Closing the locker, Sandy turned to face her companions.

"I think Bingo was pulling your leg," Phyllis said gently.

Bingo looked up at Phyllis. "I was?"

"I want my Mom back," Sandy declared simply.

Phyllis returned Sandy's stare for a few moments, then sighed. "And I want mine back. This is the main reason why I'm not running to Tom, or Sherman."

"This way's the easiest way," Sandy pointed out, her eyes looking over the two atomicars parked nearby. "We avoid fuss, bother and . . . unfortunately, it looks as if we'll have to change our plans and make use of commercial travel. Either that, or probably commit murder."

"Huh?" This from both Phyllis and Bingo.

Sandy's hands were on her hips, her right foot tapping out an irritated rhythm on the garage floor. "I spy, with my little eye, a rather prominent polyester-covered bulge

quivering in the back seat of the nearest atomicar. Which means one of two things. Either we've started using atomicars for the storage of filled garbage bags . . . or we have a hack author as a stowaway." Muttering under her breath, Sandy went to the vehicle, rapping her knuckles sharply on the transparent cockpit. "C'mon out, Mrs. A."

The rear passenger door opened, and Mrs. Applepound's face shyly appeared. "Hel-LOOOOOOOO!"

"Mrs. Applepound---"

"Certainly you didn't think I wouldn't suspect you'd make this sort of move," the older woman remarked, straightening herself out. "After all, I had you doing this sort of thing in *Sandra Swift & The Counterfeit Peanut-Butter Caper*, as well as *Sandra Swift & The Popcorn That Ate Idaho*, *Sandra Swift & The Disco Invaders From Pluto*, *Sandra Swift & The Blushing Submarine*, *Sandra Swift's Sweet Sixteen Party At The Bottom Of The World*---"

"Mrs. Applepound---"

"*Sandra Swift Meets The People Responsible For Daytime Television*---"

"Oh, that one gave me nightmares for weeks," Bingo admitted to Phyllis.

"Same here," Phyllis drily replied, "but probably for different reasons."

"You need me," Mrs. Applepound pointed out to Sandy.

Sandy's jaw dropped. "We need---"

"They'd notice you departing from Enterprises in an atomicar," the author quickly continued.

"Yeah, but---"

"They'd also possibly track any use of your credit cards if you used them to purchase commercial flight tickets. That not only includes your watchdogs here, but our enemies as well."

"Yeah, but---"

"On the other hand, I seriously doubt that the use of my credit card to purchase tickets would be noticed." Smiling beatifically, Mrs. Applepound stood there, waiting.

Sandy's mouth quietly began opening and closing rapidly, the image putting Bingo in mind of a freshly-caught catfish.

It took a few moments before Sandy seemed to regain control of herself. Closing her eyes she collected her breath, rubbing tiredly at her forehead. "Lord love a duck!"

“Pardon?”

“Welcome aboard, Mrs. A. Welcome aboard.”

* * * * *

Sandy’s mood suffered another setback when she learned that the only available flight to New York City out of Shopton would route them through Philadelphia, and then on to a landing at Newark.

“You are spoiled rotten,” Phyllis declared. “You’re way too used to hopping in a Swift airplane and going anywhere you please.”

“Four and a half hours,” Sandy grumbled, walking down the jetway to the waiting US Airways Bombardier CRJ200. “To travel a lousy 165 miles. We’d get there in half the time if we drove. Should’ve made this a road trip.”

“Shotgun!” Bingo called out.

Phyllis gamely continued her role as peacemaker. “We could use the time to plan,” she said. “We still need to figure out exactly what we’re gonna do once we hit the Big Apple.”

Entering the airplane, Sandy continued growling causing the flight attendant to take a cautious step backwards.

From her position at the end of the line, Mrs. Applepound piped up. “Phyllis makes a salient point. New York City is hardly the place for young ladies to flit about unchaperoned and without guidance. My cousin, the near-sighted one, tried that once.”

“The near-sighted one,” Sandy muttered.

“Do not mock the afflicted,” Mrs. Applepound airily replied, reaching her seat and opening up the overhead compartment. “Pola was foolish enough to get involved in this harebrained scheme to try and land a rich husband. It was only through kind Providence that she ended up marrying a true gentleman . . . albeit one with some tax problems.”

Shoving her own bag into the compartment over her seat, Sandy paused, then looked at Mrs. Applepound. “Now why don’t you write about things like that, Mrs. A.? Instead of writing about me?”

“As you well know by now, Sandra, I prefer writing about international intrigue and world-spanning adventure,” the author pointed out, settling into her seat. “Besides,”

she sniffed, “my brother Nunnally beat me to it. Thieving little wretch.”

Still muttering, Sandy slammed the storage compartment shut and flounced down into her seat next to Phyllis.

Behind her, and sitting next to Bingo, Mrs. Applepound had pulled out her computer and was already reviewing what she had previously written. But she spoke once again. “I’m sorry you don’t care for my books, Sandra.”

In her seat Sandy paused, closing her eyes and mouthing a silent prayer. “I . . . do . . . not . . . dislike your books, Mrs. A.,” she slowly said, trying very hard to speak clearly through tightly clenched teeth.

Later on, Phyllis would privately remark how it was the best Kirk Douglas impersonation she’d ever seen.

The twin-engined jet soon took off from Shopton, pointing itself south towards Philadelphia. Settling back in their seats, Sandy and Phyllis both pulled out their Tiny Idiots and got down to work.

“OK. Phyllis, tell me about those two Hannibal XTs.”

“Ah-hhhhh . . . right. I thought you might want to know about that first off. Checking our records, I show that the planes were purchased by a rather small European air charter service.” Phyllis scrolled through some information on her computer screen. “Luftzentrale. Based out of Hamburg.”

“”Luftzentrale’,” Sandy slowly murmured.

Having left Mrs. Applepound to her work, Bingo poked her face around the edge of the seat. “Air central’,” she translated.

“A rather safe, nondescript name,” Sandy concluded.

“And yes,” Phyllis said, “I’ve taken the liberty of checking up on them. Everything’s above board. Our European service reps have made scheduled calls to the company, and no problems have been recorded.”

Phyllis’ voice faded away, and both Sandy and Bingo looked at her. “And?” asked Sandy.

“That’s just it,” Phyllis said. “The planes were used for occasional charters throughout Europe, and sometimes overseas. Nothing spectacular. Nothing ambitious. The company hadn’t added to their airfleet, or competed to take on better paying customers. Luftzentrale’s just . . . there.”

Sandy’s eyes narrowed. “Luftzentrale’s a front.”

“A suspicion, but a good one. I’ve tried inquiring into their charter customers and, weirdly enough, I can’t dig anything up.”

“Ummmm. And ‘Weltnabel’?”

“This is where it gets interesting. Three months ago, Luftzentrale up and sells the Hannibals outright to this new company: Weltnabel. Their headquarters turns out to be a postal box in Bremen. Nothing is known or heard about Weltnabel until the Hannibals take off for America four days ago.” Phyllis saw Sandy’s mouth start to open and rushed on. “Nobody questioned the Luftzentrale sale, and investigations have only now opened into Weltnabel.”

“Which may be too late, if Weltnabel is already here,” Sandy considered half to herself. “What about the flight plan the Hannibals filed? What were they supposed to be doing in New York?”

“I managed to contact officials at Rostock-Laage Airport,” Phyllis said. “The fact that we had built the airplanes in question helped out there. According to them, the Hannibals were supposed to pick up cargo here at NYC. But here’s the kicker. According to information from the airport service crews, both planes took on far more fuel than would’ve been necessary for a trip with no cargo.”

“But absolutely necessary if they were going to be carrying something,” Sandy murmured thoughtfully. “When did the planes leave Germany?”

“Two-fifteen in the morning. And their hangar was a fairly isolated one.”

“Maybe isolated enough to sneak the tornado planes on board. Or maybe our friends made a mid-air rendezvous with the Hannibals.”

Bingo’s face pinched in a frown. “That’s sort of risky, ain’t it?”

“We do it with the Flying Lab all the time,” Sandy told her. “And we know that the tornado planes are capable of hovering, which would’ve made in-air docking possible.” Sandy considered further. “And, if the planes could launch themselves from the Hannibals, then they could’ve proceeded on to American soil on their own once they were within range.” Sandy sat quietly in thought.

Then: “Phyl, you’ve been doing a crackerjack job so far. Have you found out anything concerning who the Weltnabel people were supposed to meet up with in NYC?”

“Hadn’t got that far,” Phyllis admitted. “Do I have to give back the Crackerjacks?”

“Not yet.” Clearing the screen on her Tiny Idiot, Sandy accessed the home page for John F. Kennedy International Airport. Reaching into a pocket, Sandy pulled out her Snooper, attaching it to a slot on the side of her Tiny Idiot. She then accessed the flight information function, entering the flight numbers for the Hannibals which Phyllis

supplied.

“Both planes just sitting on the ground near the cargo and maintenance facilities, north of the main terminal area,” Sandy muttered. “No mention of . . . hello! Who have we here?”

A blinking icon had appeared on the screen. “Apparently, someone’s interested in our line of inquiry,” Sandy murmured, touching the icon. The screen responded with the message: TRACING ON/PROTECTIVE JAMMING ON.

“The good news,” Sandy said, “is that we’ll be able to find out who’s shadowing us while, at the same time, jam whoever it is from finding out where we are.”

“And the bad news?” Bingo asked.

“This’ll be like firing off a flare gun in Sherman Ames’ office. He can override jamming and get a fix on our position . . . ah! Here we go.” As Sandy watched, the screen was opening a separate window for the blinking icon, identifying it as: INVESTIGATIVE DIVISION/PORT AUTHORITY OF NEW YORK AND NEW JERSEY. “So we’re apparently not the only people who’re interested in the Hannibals.”

“They’ll be making the same inquiries as we have,” Phyllis said.

Sandy nodded, clearing her screen. “Phyllis . . . the flight plan filed back at Rostock-Laage. The flight crew, or at least the pilot, would’ve had to have left his or her name.”

Phyllis rapidly consulted her own Tiny Idiot. “Ah-hhhhh . . . Yes! Oliver Wien’s listed as being the pilot.”

“Spell that last name,” Sandy asked, tapping on her screen.

As Phyllis did so, Bingo watched intently. “What’re you doing?”

“The planes are deserted,” Sandy said, “or else our nosy friends from the Port Authority would’ve gone out there directly to interview the crews. I’m betting the people we’re looking for are somewhere in Manhattan, or thereabouts. Employing a useful, yet perhaps morally ambiguous little tool which Sherman downloaded into my computer some time back, I’m systematically hacking into the registration computers of all the New York City area hotels, seeing if Wien is registered in any of them.”

“That,” Phyllis said, “is just way the heck too obvious.”

“I gotta agree,” Bingo chimed in.

“Motion supported,” Mrs. Applepound said from behind them. “In *Sandra Swift Takes The Cannoli*, I had the Mob hiding out in a safe house in the middle of Tucson. It took you eight chapters to find them.”

Sandy drummed her fingers on the arm of her chair.

“In the book, that is.”

“So you people think this is all too obvious, huh?” Sandy asked, a smirk growing on her face as she stared at her screen. “Try this on for size. Three days ago a Mister Oliver Wien, accompanied by seven men---”

“Sandy,” Phyllis broke in.

“---and three women.”

Phyllis snapped her mouth shut.

“Checked into one of the three-bedroom specialty suites at the New York Palace Hotel.” Sandy triumphantly lifted her smirk to Phyllis’ face. “Cargo plane crews from Germany are affording specialty suites at the New York Palace?”

“Sandy---”

“There’s more than one Oliver Wien visiting Manhattan at the same time?”

“Even as hopeful as it sounds,” Phyllis said, “you’ve got to agree that this is still very circumstantial.”

Sandy slowly nodded. “Granted.”

“The FBI, the Port Authority . . . Lord knows how many professional law enforcement agencies are out there searching for whoever kidnapped our mothers, and Mrs. Nospe. They have agents, computers, budgets---”

“---whereas we’ve just been poking about on the Internet, on our own, for a little while,” Sandy finished simply.

“I know we’re smart, Sandy---”

“She’s read it in my books,” Mrs. Applepound pointed out.

“---but, for the moment, let’s presume that we’ve actually managed to dig up the hiding places of the bad guys. Okay?”

Sandy nodded.

“Doesn’t it strike you as more than a little suspicious that we so easily managed to find out where the Weltnabel agents are?”

“We . . . know more than the professionals,” Sandy said.

“Or?” Phyllis insisted.

“Or,” Sandy reluctantly continued, “we were meant to find the information so easily, and you think we are walking straight into a trap!”

Phyllis nodded vigorously.

“And we’re gonna get bopped on the head,” Bingo added in a murmur.

Sandy nodded. “Yes!”

Phyllis’ eyes widened. “Yes? Yes? You actually want us to walk into a trap?”

“And get bopped on the head?” added Bingo.

“The trick to successfully avoiding a trap,” Sandy patiently said, “is to realize that it’s there in the first place. I forget who said that.”

“You did,” Mrs. Applepound’s voice floated from behind. “In *Sandra Swift And The Solid Steel Nightgown*.”

Sandy nodded. “You see?”

“Just before you got pushed into the crocodile pit,” Mrs. Applepound continued.

Phyllis nodded. “You see?”

Sandy poked her tongue out. “Look: if you people are so concerned, you can all stay behind in Philadelphia, and I can continue to New York on my own.”

“Huh. And let you get bopped on the head all on your oddy-knock?”

“Not to mention also possibly finding your mother,” Sandy said.

Exhaling noisily, Phyllis sat back in her seat. “Yeah. That too.”

Frowning, Bingo moved back to get comfortable, settling next to Mrs. Applepound.

“So what’s the game plan?” the author asked, still tapping away.

“Mmmm, don’t rightly know. We tend to play these things by ear. One suggestion, though.”

“Oh?”

“Duck if you hear me yell ‘Ouch’!”

Chapter Fifteen: Manhattan Mission.

"So here we are at last," Mrs. Applepound muttered, tapping on her computer. "Standing on Madison Avenue, with the hopefully optimistic façade of St. Patrick's Cathedral comfortably to our backs. Across the street from the decorative and fashionable New York Palace which is, even as I type these words, doubtless crawling with murderous miscreants bent on ending our lives."

Poking her tongue into her cheek, Mrs. Applepound thought for a few moments. "How does one correctly spell 'execrably atrocious situation'?"

Sandy had unfolded her Snooper into its telescope mode and was slowly gazing up and down the side at the hotel across the street. But she apparently heard the comment. "I would think that you, of all people, would know how to spell 'execrably atrocious'."

"I suffer from infrequent bouts of dyslexia," Mrs. Applepound replied. She then looked up, blinking. "Or was that meant to be another dig at my writing, Sandra?"

Sandy continued carefully looking up at the windows. "Heaven forfend, Mrs. A."

"I'll just go ahead and step back a bit here," Phyllis commented. "Give both of you a clear field of fire at each other."

"There are two three-bedroom specialty suites in the hotel," Sandy said, thoughtfully, lowering her Snooper. "One on the 14th floor and the other on the 16th. We can either make inquiries at the front desk."

"Inadvisable," Phyllis replied.

"Or we can split up and take each of the two rooms simultaneously."

"You never split up when facing bad guys," Bingo pointed out solemnly.

"I quite agree," Mrs. Applepound added. "Haven't you read any of my books?"

Sandy felt her knees wobbling slightly as she swallowed the several dozen immediate answers which came to her mind. "Or," she said, collecting herself, "we can try a slightly more subtle approach." Unslinging her travel bag from her shoulder she opened it, rummaging about and producing several metal spheres the size of tennis balls which she began passing out to the others.

"Ah-hhhh," Phyllis said, nodding. "The redoubtable Eye-Spy camera. Bingo and I were wondering what you were getting out of that special locker before we left."

"Since we were heading for New York City, I had a feeling we'd be needing these, as well as several other goodies," Sandy said. "Everybody have a couple? Marvelous. I loaded up on some things, expecting to have to make some sort of assault on a tall structure, or perhaps even one of the airplanes."

Phyllis wasn't too comfortable with the taste of the word "assault" in her mind. A frown crossed her face as she realized something else. "Wait a minute. How in the world did you get this stuff past airport security?"

"I have two secret weapons," Sandy replied, closing the bag. "A winning personality, and a travel bag made of Tomasite fabric which distorts airport scanners. Okay . . . now. I studied the layout of the hotel on my computer on the flight into Newark, and remotely programmed the location of the specialty suites into the Eye-Spies. We're gonna activate them, and they're gonna perform covert surveillance on the suites before we make our move."

Phyllis was contemplating the spheres in her hand. "Covert?"

"Yes."

"And you don't think people aren't going to notice little metal globes hovering outside their window in broad daylight?"

"I would," Bingo said.

"Me too," Mrs. Applepound included.

"They're not expecting a high-tech offense," Sandy argued.

"The same people who're employing exotic super weapons to attack us," Phyllis countered.

Sandy took a breath. "Work with me, Phyl."

"All right . . . all right . . ."

"OK," Sandy instructed, "just squeeze the globe until you hear a click and they'll automatically take off---Cop!"

Mrs. Applepound looked up. "What?"

"Policeman," hissed Sandy. "Act casual."

"Why? We're the very picture of innocence, dear."

"We're standing across the street from a major hotel, all of us holding two---"

"I have three," Bingo pointed out.

"---metal spheres. That's got to attract some sort of attention."

"In New York?" Phyllis asked.

Sandy ignored her and the four women stood there, quietly trying to blend into the background as the uniformed officer strolled by, offering a polite nod to the group. Bingo began tossing her Eye-Spies about in a rather attractive juggling routine.

"You are way the heck too paranoid," Phyllis told Sandy as the policeman continued on down the sidewalk.

"It's just that we're so close," Sandy replied. "I don't want to trip up now."

"We could make excellent use of the local police force."

"Phyl---"

"Find someone like Barry Fitzgerald," Mrs. Applepound offered.

"Or Roy Scheider," Bingo added.

"Or a local detective agency, at least," Phyllis continued. "Someone with much more experience in the area. Look," she turned to nod at a nearby bus stop bench. "There's an advertisement for one right over there. F-I-i-t- . . . Flitcraft. They've even got an office not too far away, over on West 51st, and they claim to be high-tech and efficient and discreet."

"I'd rather we handled this ourselves," Sandy argued.

"And they have a really cute little girl in their ad. How can you argue with that?"

"Probably not as much as I'm arguing with you people right now," Sandy almost yelled. "Now let's go and get these things in the air."

"Better hurry," Bingo suggested. "Afternoon Mass is almost due to be let out."

"OK then, before we get sidetracked onto another discussion. One . . . two . . . three . . ."

The woman all squeezed the spheres they carried. A faint humming appeared, like a distant hive of bees, and the Eye-Spies smoothly rose into the air on miniature annular fan jets. Picking up speed the small fleet broke into two groups, each group heading for a different section of the hotel building across the street.

Nodding in satisfaction, Sandy took her Tiny Idiot and switched it on, once again attaching her Snooper to the input slot on the side. "I also took the liberty of programming the Eye-Spies with whatever available biometric information Sherman had managed to collect on both my Mom and Aunt Helen."

"Ah-hhhh," Phyllis replied.

"I didn't think Sherman had enough time to gather information on Frau Nospe, but the Spies should be able to read enough through the walls or windows to make some sort of approximation if they're in either of those rooms."

Everyone crowded around Sandy and peered at the screen, which had split to show images from both Eye-Spy groups.

"They don't have to hover outside the windows," Sandy pointed out aloud, mainly to convince herself. "They can attach themselves to the wall and scan directly through the material . . . here we go!"

Both sets of images were showing the rapid approach of the outside wall of the hotel. The images faded to be replaced by electronic patterns which quickly settled to show a series of multicolored shapes.

"The red silhouettes are, of course, thermal images of people," Sandy pointed out. "The green lines indicate furniture, walls and such. Room on the right screen . . . the 14th floor . . . empty. Room on the left . . . the 16th floor . . ."

"Five people," hissed Bingo.

"Three of them producing female readings," added Sandy, her heart racing.

Mrs. Applepound peered closer. "How in the world can you tell?"

"Tom calls it 'gender-specific somatocatalog response'. I'm not too clear on the details, but apparently there's enough of an average difference between male and female biological readings to satisfy the Eye-Spies."

Mrs. Applepound didn't pursue the issue further, but made a quiet note to herself to spend as little time as possible from now on in the restrooms at Swift Enterprises.

Sandy was looking up towards the 16th floor of the hotel. "We had eight men checking into the hotel. We're missing six."

"Good," declared Phyllis.

"Good?"

"Less of them to shoot at us."

"I want to know where they are," Sandy insisted.

"We don't," Phyllis, Bingo and Mrs. Applepound replied.

"Let's just get things moving and get our Moms back," Phyllis added.

"Still," Sandy muttered, looking around.

"Maybe they're at Saks," Mrs. Applepound suggested. "It's just down the street."

"They are not at Saks, Mrs. A."

The older woman raised an imperious eyebrow. "I am just trying to be of help, Sandra. I'm aware of the seriousness of the situation. There is no need to be snippy."

Sandy worked to get her breathing more under control. "Okay . . . okay. Yeah, let's stick to the job at hand. Maybe you guys are right and we're better off facing fewer bad guys. Rats! I wish Mom or Aunt Helen had Snoopers, or their cell phones. Something we could use to signal our approach."

"I may regret hearing the answer to this," Phyllis said, "but what exactly are you planning for us to do?"

Sandy's mind whirled while, at the same time, she struggled to keep her voice at a level which would hopefully convince the others that she was in possession of a careful plan. "I need one of you, preferably someone with a Snooper, to stay out here and keep an eye on the 16th floor window."

Phyllis' expression wasn't meant for public display. "Why? Are you expecting everyone to suddenly fly out the window?"

Sandy didn't immediately answer. "If Mom or Aunt Helen get an idea of what's going on, they might try to signal," she said.

"If I was holding your Mom and mine hostage," Phyllis pointed out, "I wouldn't let them near a window."

"Besides that, I want someone here to keep one of those nearby taxicabs in plain sight in case we have to make a sudden getaway."

Phyllis slowly nodded. "OK. Good idea, there. I'll go ahead and keep watch."

"Bingo? You and Mrs. A. go into the hotel lobby with me. The two of you will stay there and keep an eye open."

Bingo's mouth opened, then closed again.

"We'll all be linked by Snooper," Sandy said. "Keep in constant touch."

"What'll you be doing?" Bingo asked.

Sandy let her eyes gaze up towards the 16th floor.

"Oh Boy!" Bingo exclaimed. "Oh . . ."

"Just me," Sandy insisted. "Just by myself. Nice and quiet. I'll have you and Mrs. A. keeping tabs on the lobby, and Phyllis as utility infielder out here. I'll try and get the lay of the land," she continued, mentally crossing her fingers, "and you and Mrs. A. can maybe also spot some hotel cops or something. Just in case."

"Nice and quiet," Bingo echoed.

"Uh-huh."

Phyllis murmured something which sounded a lot like "That'd be a change."

"Let's go," Sandy said and, with Bingo and Mrs. Applepound, scooted across Madison Avenue, approaching the Villard Mansion front for the hotel.

Entering the building, Sandy slowed down a bit. "Okay, Mrs. A., here's where I have a special job for you."

The author fairly quivered. "Oh! Tingle!"

"I may be paranoid, like Phyllis keeps accusing me of," Sandy said, staring around. "And maybe our nasty friends have some people down here in the lobby keeping an eye out for the authorities. At least that's what I'd do if I were in their shoes."

Mrs. Applepound nodded.

"They'd recognize me. You, on the other hand . . ."

Realization dawned on Mrs. Applepound's face. "O Ho! You want me to provide a distraction."

"Just be visible."

"Always am."

Dropping back near one of the elegant stairways, Sandy made herself as small as possible, watching as Mrs. Applepound and Bingo both walked further towards the central lobby area. Sandy noticed how Bingo kept throwing sharp looks back in her direction.

Reaching a particularly open area, Mrs. Applepound suddenly threw her arms out wide. "Hel-LOOOOOOOOO!"

As expected, all eyes turned towards her.

Quick and silent, Sandy immediately scooted towards a nearby bank of elevators, reaching one just as the doors slid open.

Reaching it, she punched the button for the 55th floor. As the elevator began heading upwards she began preparing herself. First she disconnected her Snooper from the Tiny Idiot and worked the articulation of the device until it became a metal loop that she was able to securely fit around her ear, leaving one end near her lips.

"I'm in," she said. "Is everyone else on line?"

"Reading you," said Phyllis.

"Ditto," replied Bingo. "We've got a nice crowd around us."

"Just keep your eyes open. And use your Idiots to watch the Eye-Spies." As she talked, Sandy took her Tiny Idiot and firmly attached it to her belt, positioning the device so that she could look down and see what was on the screen without touching it. She then slung her travel bag back over her shoulders, stretching out the extra straps and creating a harness which kept it tight against her on the hip opposite where the computer rested.

"This isn't going to work," she muttered.

"Pardon?"

She shook her head. "Nothing."

The elevator came to a halt, letting Sandy out onto the 55th floor. Quickly looking around, she found what she needed: a nondescript door which indicated the location of the stairwell.

Locked. Reaching into the bag, Sandy removed a small, pen-like device. An advanced version of one of Tom's earliest inventions: a portable soldering iron. This one, however, had been modified to be used as a portable acetylene torch.

Selecting maximum focus, Sandy touched it to the lock and pressed the trigger. A tiny star of actinic light appeared and, within seconds, the lock had been burned through. Pushing through the door, Sandy immediately headed for the stairwell, running up the narrow flights.

Bingo's voice whispered into her ear. "Sandy? I'm getting some movement here in the lobby from some official-looking types."

"I probably set off some alarms just now."

"What did you do----"

"Stay on it, Bingo." Sandy had reached a door marked ROOF ACCESS. Also locked, but another application of the pocket torch soon eliminated that problem.

Sandy burst out onto the roof of the hotel. All around her were the hissing and groaning and mist of the enormous air conditioning units, accompanied by satellite dishes, utility sheds and a water tower.

There were also, she knew, two exclusive penthouse suites on either side of the roof, but her attention drew her steps over to the edge of the building.

"Some uniformed police rushing into the lobby now," Bingo reported.

Glancing back over her shoulder Sandy saw that, so far, there was no sign of pursuit. Keeping quiet, she allowed herself to peer over the edge of the building. There . . . fifty-five floors below her . . . Madison Avenue stretched for all to see. Across from it was the stateliness of St. Patrick's . . .

And Phyllis was a barely recognizable dot on the sidewalk below.

"O-kay," Sandy muttered. "Now for the fun part." Speed, she realized, was of the essence. Not only would their opponents soon be attracted by all the activity, but Sandy's ears were beginning to pick up the sounds of sirens approaching from far below.

Gazing down, she mentally judged the distance between her position and the 16th floor. Only thirty-nine floors, but it looked much further.

Reaching into the bag she pulled out a pair of yellow plastic gloves and matching slippers. As rapidly as possible she placed the slippers over her shoes, fastening them tightly. Then she pulled the gloves onto her hands, careful not to apply too much pressure and break the myriad of tiny beads which covered both items of clothing. While doing this she reminded herself that the items were not one of Swift Enterprises most top-selling products, and therefore not regularly tested. But, then again, the rock-climbing industry wasn't meant to be one of the bigger consumers of Enterprises products.

That part done, she reached again into the bag, removing a small hand-sized metal plate. One side of the plate was coated with a thin layer of black plastic. This item she slipped securely into her belt.

Reaching down, Sandy began rapidly tapping on the screen of her computer. Immediately, the screen which had been showing the Eye-Spy monitoring of the deserted 14th floor room blanked out. As she waited she studied the remaining screen.

Still five people. The three female readings apparently sitting at the far end of the room away from the window.

Good.

A hum of bees, and Sandy looked up to see the four Eye-Spies she had summoned now hovering nearby. Reaching out she carefully moved them together, positioning them until they were locked to form a small square.

A very small square.

Sandy began taking several deep breaths . . .

And, behind her, the door was knocked open to allow a group of men, including two police officers, out onto the roof.

Sending a silent prayer to St. Patrick, Sandy leaped onto the narrow ledge, then stepped onto the square of linked Eye-Spies. The machines, hardly designed to carry something as heavy as an adult human, immediately began plummeting downwards . . .

And Sandy with them.

She concentrated mightily on counting, both feeling and hearing the Eye-Spies whine as they attempted to remain airborne. The floors were rushing past, but she felt that the tiny engines of the spheres were at least slowing her descent a bit. Not enough for a safe landing. Not hardly. But just enough for her to . . .

Jump!

She smacked heavily against the dark glass and anodized aluminum wall of the hotel, her gloves and slippers flattening against the surface. Below her the Eye-Spies, their mechanisms tortured beyond repair, continued falling.

Sandy, meanwhile, kept praying through gritted teeth as she slowly felt herself sliding down the wall. The impact had broken open the beads on the gloves and slippers, and the liquid short-term adhesive, originally designed to provide additional grip for climbers, struggled to keep her attached to the building.

Sixteenth floor, she silently estimated, concentrating on maintaining a firm grip as she slid lower. Fifteenth.

The adhesive, she knew, wouldn't last forever. It wasn't designed to.

But it was gradually slowing her down as she began dropping within view of the 14th floor. Specifically, the windows looking into the specialty suite. Sandy peered as closely as possible through the glass. Two men in suite . . .

AND MOM!

They were all there. Mom, Aunt Helen and Frau Nospe. All of them staring in open-mouthed shock at the sight of Sandy clinging precariously to the outside. From where she was, Sandy could clearly make out her mother's mouth opening to form the words Oh My . . .

"Sandy!" shrieked Phyllis' voice. "Jesus!"

Sandy somehow doubted that Phyllis was referring to the service at St. Patrick's. Slowly pulling her hand loose from the sticky spot it had left on the glass, Sandy reached down to remove the small metal plate from her belt. Meanwhile, she noticed one of the men in the room speaking excitedly into a phone.

Watching him, Sandy slammed the black plastic side of the plate hard against the window, activating it. Then braced herself. She saw her mother quickly mouthing something to the others and her, Aunt Helen and Frau Nospe rapidly ducking to the floor.

The directional explosive detonated, creating a large hole in the window. Desperately grabbing at the edges, Sandy pulled herself through and on into the room.

As smoothly as possible she rolled to her feet, coming face to face with one of the men. He was already reaching into his coat, his face taking on determined lines. But Sandy continued moving, bringing her leg up in a practiced kick, knocking the man over. She immediately followed with a palm-edge blow that kept him down.

Straightening up she faced the remaining man, seeing him pulling a pistol from his coat. He was standing on the opposite side of the work desk, and Sandy tensed . . .

And the door in the foyer was suddenly knocked open. This was followed by Bingo, automatically diving for the floor, her Snooper pointed and ready. There was a loud pop, and the gunman found himself enmeshed in the yellow plastic adhesive which the Snoopers employed as a defensive weapon.

Sandy exhaled noisily.

Over near the couch her mother seemed ready to faint. "Sandra Helene---"

"Later," Sandy declared. "Out out out." Waving her arms she began herding her mother, her Aunt Helen and Mrs. Nospe towards the door. Bingo had already preceded them into the hallway, watching all sides.

Passing a side table, Sandy noticed some papers and, on impulse, she swept them into her bag. Still rushing, she joined Bingo and the others outside. "Where's Mrs. A?"

"Sent her to Phyllis to get a taxi," Bingo replied moving towards the elevators. "When the federales began arrivin' I decided to head for the 16th floor in the off chance you'd need help." She punctuated the remark with a short laugh.

"Good timing," Sandy responded. "Mom? You guys all right?"

"We're fine, Sandy, but---"

"Mom, we've got to undistinguish ourselves as rapidly as possible from this place. We'll sort out the lawsuits later."

The women pressed into an elevator, and Bingo punched for the lobby.

"I'm not arguing that I'd much rather be with you and Bingo than with the . . . people . . . we were with up there," Mary Swift said, working to catch her breath. "And it's not that I don't appreciate any of my children exercising initiative---"

"Then---"

"THEN WHAT THE HELL WERE YOU DOING CLIMBING THE WINDOW OUT THERE?"

Sandy winced and tried to appear smaller.

"Mary," Helen chided. "I, for one, am grateful for Sandy's impulsiveness." Leaning close she kissed Sandy on the cheek.

"Und I am as vell," Téa Nospe replied, copying Helen's action.

Mary Swift seemed to collect her breath and moved to gather her daughter into her arms, hugging her tightly. "Thank you, dear," she murmured. "I just tend to worry."

For her part, Sandy was returning the hug, never wanting to let go.

"So I take it your brother . . ."

"All girl operation this time," Sandy said.

Mary moaned low.

"Well it worked."

"True."

The elevator reached the lobby and the women departed, Bingo taking point as they moved towards Madison Avenue. Sandy touched the Snooper still attached to her ear. "We're almost there. The hens are in the basket."

A moan in her ear. "Praise God. Everything . . ."

"Everything's fine, Phyl. Everyone`s OK. We got transportation?"

"Mrs. A. and I are holding onto a taxi now."

The women moved outside and, as quickly as possible, made it to the sidewalk where both Phyllis and Mrs. Applepound were standing by a waiting taxi. Or at least Mrs. Applepound remained standing as Phyllis, upon spotting her mother, rushed over into her arms, almost crying.

"It's all right," Helen Newton assured her daughter. "Your crazy friend broke us out."

"She sure did," Phyllis replied, turning to spare Sandy a look. "You nut!"

Sandy and Mrs. Applepound were working to get everyone into the taxi, when Sandy suddenly noticed Bingo. The Texan had assumed a tense stance, almost as if she were at a starting line, waiting for a gun to go off.

"Bingo?"

"The man down there," Bingo said in a low voice. "Blue shirt. Black trousers. Over near the news kiosk."

Sandy looked up, her eyes immediately meeting those of the man Bingo was pointing out. As she watched he suddenly turned and began walking away.

"The last time I saw him," Bingo said, "was in Port Union. Pointing a rifle at us."

Decisions rapidly slammed into Sandy's mind. Removing her pocketbook from her bag she slipped it into her slacks. She then thrust the bag into Bingo's arms. "Have Sherman analyze the documents in that bag. Fingerprints . . . the works!"

"Sandy!"

Taking the smaller girl's shoulders, Sandy firmly pushed her into the taxi with the others. "Don't bother with the airport," she said. "Get to a safe, open location. Central Park maybe. Contact Shopton and have something come and airlift all of you out."

Mary tried to lean out of the taxi. "Sandy---"

"Move!" Slamming the door shut, Sandy backed away from the taxi. Then she turned and began pursuing the sniper.

Chapter Sixteen: Big Apple Bust!

Breaking into a run, Sandy raced down Madison Avenue, one hand unhooking the Tiny Idiot from her belt and moving her left hand and wrist through the flexible loops in the back of the device, making the small computer easier to reach. Trying to keep an eye on her quarry she let her fingers tap on the screen, summoning the Eye-Spies.

Ahead of her, the man was quickly slipping around the corner onto East 50th Street, and Sandy fed instructions to the robots, sending them on. She reached the corner as the small fleet of metal spheres swooped down from above, taking the lead.

Their presence was also causing quite a number of locals to duck and glance upwards. Good, thought Sandy. I want everything to be nice and visible. Especially the guy I'm chasing.

Speaking of which . . . reaching deep into her pocket, Sandy pulled out the telescopic component of the Snooper. Continuing to search ahead, she raised the device to her eye.

No . . . no . . . no . . .

Yes! She spotted the man far ahead of her, just passing Giambelli's. Fast little bunny.

Squeezing the Snooper she transmitted the man's image to the tracking sensors in the Eye-Spies. Now the robots would be locked onto him no matter where he went.

Of course, if he was to duck inside a building, or decide to take a taxi . . .

Sandy shook the worries out of her head and concentrated on following. Raising her left wrist she summoned up map information on the area she was in, while wondering where he would be trying to reach on foot? She hoped it would be somewhere which would lead her to where the rest of his crew was hiding out.

And then what? Sandy asked herself. Shaking her head again she weighed the existing options. According to the Tiny Idiot, the nearest subway station was another block down and one block north: Lexington and East 51st. The German Consulate General was located some five blocks further down. Certainly he had to have another destination in mind.

He was approaching Park Avenue, with Sandy just more than half a block behind. Glancing down at the computer, Sandy's thoughts swam through worry. St. Bartholomew's . . . the Waldorf Astoria . . . there were at least a dozen hiding places ahead of him he could use to avoid the Eye-Spies, and her. Any moment now the spheres were going to attract the attention of a police officer, or security guard. Someone with a gun, and Sandy reasonably suspected that quite a few New Yorkers wouldn't be comfortable about a squadron of smooth metal objects flying overhead.

There was still the other part of the Snooper wrapped around her ear. One end of it held the defensive adhesive charge. But its range was limited, and Sandy also didn't want to fire into the crowd that was between her and her target.

But she knew she was running out of options. The man kept glancing up, seeing the Eye-Spies dancing in the air just above him, and he was moving about on the sidewalk, obviously trying to shake loose from their pursuit. He was also repeatedly looking over his shoulder, causing Sandy to duck into a doorway, or drop down behind a UPS van parked on the curb. Eventually he was going to try something radical.

He knows he's been tagged, Sandy's mind screamed. He'll be getting desperate. Does he run to his accomplices, or does he try to lead me away?

He had now reached Park Avenue and suddenly paused. Obviously it had been his intention to cross the busy street, but the lights had just changed. Picking up her pace, Sandy allowed herself to smile. Would he decide to bolt left, or right . . .

But he suddenly lunged out ahead, directly into the path of oncoming traffic, and a symphony of horns and shouts was produced as he almost ended up beneath the wheels of a delivery truck.

Swearing once, Sandy broke into an even faster run, her eye mentally judging the obstacles ahead of her. Even if the Eye-Spies continued tailing him from above, she did not want to lose contact with him. Trusting in her reflexes (as well as in whatever Higher Order protected test pilots and young blondes), she reached the curb and continued out into the street.

A horn immediately blared, and Sandy found herself directly in the path of a taxi. Something primal inside her caused her to immediately freeze, and the car was practically on top of her . . .

But the driver was apparently experienced, and brakes screeched out in anguish as the car came to a stop, the front bumper only just brushing against Sandy's legs. Trying to keep her heart from stopping, Sandy could just barely make out what was probably a long and well-deserved string of profanity being delivered to her from inside the vehicle. Her eyes turned back again to her objective.

And he was standing on the tree-shaded traffic median, the Eye-Spies hovering above him like a halo. Standing there, smiling nastily at her.

Sandy angrily smacked a fist down on the hood of the taxi. OK, she silently screamed at him. You've spotted me.

* * * * *

Meanwhile, another taxi had just turned onto 6th Avenue and was heading north towards Central Park.

Inside, Mary Swift came to a decision. "Bingo!"

"Ma'am?"

"You still have your Snooper with you?"

A cautious look entered the eyes of the little Texan. "Yes'm."

"Stop the taxi here," Mary announced. "I want you to set your Snooper to Sandy's," she explained to Bingo. "Track her and find her."

Phyllis had been using the communicator in her own Snooper to talk to Enterprises, but she now lowered it as she, her mother, Téa Nospe and Mrs. Applepound followed the exchange.

Bingo's expression was becoming troubled. "Ma'am . . . Miz Swift . . ."

"You should be able to catch up with her."

The trouble grew into agony. "I can't!"

"What?"

"I gotta tell you, ma'am, this time I'm in agreement with Sandy. We gotta get you and Miz Newton and Miz Nospe out of here and back to Enterprises safely. We also gotta get this bag of evidence to Sherman as soon as possible."

Mary spent several moments staring at Bingo, trying to keep herself under control. Then, with a growl of frustration, she flounced back against the seat.

* * * * *

Having survived Park Avenue, Sandy was now back on the chase. Her target was passing St. Bartholomew's, seemingly headed for Lexington Avenue. His stride seemed more relaxed, appearing as if he was almost ready to put his hands into his pockets and begin whistling. And all this with the Eye-Spies still hovering overhead.

And why shouldn't he appear nonchalant? Sandy's mind argued as she passed between a sidewalk lunch cart and the entrance to a karate dojo. He now knew who was following him, how far away and from what direction.

She desperately wanted to catch up to him, grab him and immediately use him for Hapkido practice. Either that, or engage in an impromptu course in self-taught anatomy. But Sandy also wanted to know where the others in his gang were hiding.

Options whirled through her head. If he climbed into a taxi, then she would order the Eye-Spies to magnetically attach themselves to the car, and Devil take the hindmost. If he reached Lexington and turned north, towards the subway station, she'd then order the robots to descend and try to trip him up. Either move wouldn't get her closer to the others, but she didn't want to lose the one she had.

Her computer suddenly beeped, interrupting her thoughts, and she snapped at it. "What?"

Composing herself, she raised the device to study its message. And felt her stomach dropping. The map function was anxiously announcing: ALTERNATE ENTRANCE TO EAST 51st STREET SUBWAY STATION DIRECTLY AHEAD --- UPDATE COURTESY SOURCE DT-B.

Sandy's mind went into overdrive. Another entrance to the station. And he was almost at it while she was still almost half a block away.

Breaking into a run again she stared down the street, her fingers once more tapping on the computer. As she watched, she could clearly see her target turning in the direction of the doors leading to the subway station.

She also saw the Eye-Spies suddenly descend upon him, closing ranks. Shrieks and cries of surprise from passerbys as the man whirled about, batting wildly at the spheres. Sandy could hear whistles blowing from somewhere and picked up her own pace, wanting to get to the scene first.

The man dropped back into the shaded plaza of a building, still slapping at the Eye-Spies as he maneuvered closer to the subway station entrance. Judging the distance, Sandy felt she could make a successful tackle . . .

And she felt a hand on her shoulder. A deep voice: "Hold it, Miss."

Sandy turned, ready to counterattack, but held off as she saw it was a police officer. "Thank God, Officer---"

"Are you having anything to do with those machines attacking the people?"

"Officer, that man over there was involved in kidnapping my mother and a German national. He's getting away---"

The policeman's grip was solid as he led Sandy to a brick pillar near a Starbuck's entrance "Put your hands on your head," he ordered.

"Officer---" Sandy wildly looked about. The Eye-Spies had returned to simply drifting about in the air above the corner of 50th and Lexington. She searched again, and moaned as she realized her quarry had used the confusion to make his goal of the subway station.

Two police cars had now pulled up to the curb, their passengers busily emerging. The officer who was covering Sandy was talking into his radio. "37 and 415 on a subject, 50th and Lexington. Possible 507 and 594."

"Officer!" Sandy cried out.

"I'll take this," a new voice said, and Sandy found herself looking directly into the dark eyes of a tall and well-built man, not much older than her. He was dressed in business clothes, unsmiling and was now making an effort to remove the Tiny Idiot from her wrist.

"Hey!"

"Those are ordinary surveillance devices, aren't they?" the man asked, nodding at the Eye-Spies.

"Yeah, but---"

"You can switch them off with this, can't you?"

"Yes, but---"

"What's the command for doing so?"

The man's voice was firm, and Sandy suspected she wasn't going to get much further unless she was prepared to physically disable not only him, but five very large and very formidable looking examples of the New York City Police Academy.

She sighed. "The blinking eye icon, upper right portion of the screen. Touch it, then scroll down to where it says 'overall command shell'. Touch that, then touch 'clear all commands'."

The man did so, and the Eye-Spies promptly fell to the sidewalk with a clatter, rolling about.

"Collect those," the man ordered to one of the officers, who went to gather up the devices.

Feeling calmer, but no less desperate, Sandy decided to try again. "Officer---"

"Detective Lieutenant Harris Link . . . NYPD Counterterrorism Unit, assigned to the 17th Precinct."

"Thank God. Detective . . . the man I was chasing has been involved in kidnapping and attempted murder, and he's down in the subway and, right now, I could use your help---"

"I'd say you could use some help," Link replied, half nodding to himself. He looked up from the Tiny Idiot to stare directly into Sandy's eyes. "You're under arrest, Sandra Swift."

Chapter Seventeen: A Proposition!

The entire routine. Taken in handcuffs to 167 East 51st Street. Deprived of her handbag, her Snooper segments, even her security amulet. Sitting close alongside Detective Link who remained disgustingly quiet and closed mouthed to all her questions and entreaties. Throughout the trip Sandy struggled mightily to keep her language civil. For one thing there was her upbringing to consider. More to the point, though, there was also the speculation that present matters wouldn't improve by using foul language on a New York antiterrorist cop.

At the precinct house she was thoroughly subjected to the sort of business which, up to now, she had only seen in movies and on television. Fingerprinted . . . photographed . . . the works. A small part of her was pleased to note that the New York City Police Department was making use of several Swift Enterprises products. Her body underwent full forensic retroscopy, as well as telejector recording and atomic tracker scan. She also noticed a group of Swift robots patiently waiting in the precinct garage: "Frontline"

Hazardous Area Interdiction Units equipped with full area-denial and medical assist modules.

Pleased, yes. But Sandy had never expected to be on the receiving end of such equipment. And certainly not under such circumstances.

I must make notes for Phyllis, she thought dryly. She might want to update the catalog descriptions.

The whirlwind tour finally ended in a much more prosaic setting: a standard police interview room. The usual pale green paint job surrounding a simple table. Two wooden chairs under fluorescent lighting. And, next to the door, the rather obvious mirror which Sandy resolutely refrained from looking at and making faces.

Detective Link was settling into the seat opposite her, and Sandy took the opportunity to study him a bit more closely. No archetypical, jolly New York son of the old sod here. No scarred veteran. Harris Link had a look which was a mixture of Keir Dullea with a younger Gene Barry. His face carried the sort of determination she'd seen on men such as Bud, her brother and her father. It was also the sort of determination she'd seen often on the face of Sherman Ames (who, she suspected, was doubtless going bald from tearing his hair out back in Shopton). As with Bud and Sherman, Link possessed the body of an accomplished track star. In fact, Sandy grudgingly allowed herself to admit that he possessed it rather well.

Stop it, a small part of her mind ordered.

But she glanced down at his hand. No sign of a wedding ring---

I said STOP IT, her mind yelled.

For his part, Link's eyes had been examining her as closely as she had been looking over him, and he now seemed to relax slightly. "You're entitled to have a lawyer present if you wish, Miss Swift," he said politely

Sandy raised an eyebrow. "So you can talk, Detective Link."

"Considerably more than talk," Link replied. "But the comment stands. We can adjourn briefly while you contact a lawyer . . ."

Sandy shook her head, wondering if she was making a huge mistake. "I've done nothing illegal," she replied, mentally crossing her fingers. "I am, in fact, acting under the auspices of the State Department in regards to an ongoing investigation---"

"My department is aware of the investigation," Link broke in, gently raising a finger for silence.

Sandy allowed herself to catch her breath. "Then you're aware that my mother, a family friend and the wife of a German national had been kidnapped---"

"We'd been appraised of the situation---"

"Can I please finish a sentence here?"

A slight smile appeared on Link's face. "All right," he said. "And I do apologize. Please go ahead."

Was that a twinkle in the brown eyes? Sandy shook the thought out of her mind and bore on. "Our investigation indicated that there was every chance of the kidnapers being based here in the city. I made the decision to come and attempt a rescue, which I did. In the course of the rescue I spotted someone who had attempted to kill us back in Ohio. I was in the process of pursuing him directly when you people picked me up." She took a breath. "And now he's gotten clean away."

This time it was one of Link's eyebrows which rose. "You affected a rescue."

Sandy nodded.

Link casually reached into his coat, producing a small computer similar to Sandy's own. Accessing it he studied the small screen. "On official records you're listed as a senior test pilot for Swift Enterprises---"

"The senior test pilot."

Link nodded. "Emphasis on the 'The', then. Is it common practice for Enterprises to let test pilots carry out criminal investigations?" His eyes rose from the screen to fix solidly on her.

It occurred to Sandy that she would've had no trouble explaining any of this to her family, or Bud, or Sherman. But here, in the interrogation room, there was an admitted weirdness to the way the words sounded.

Still: "You've doubtless heard that Enterprises has been recently attacked."

Link nodded.

"Our own security people have been heavily involved in the work surrounding the attack. That, plus the fact that I had been gathering information in Ohio, made the idea of me pursuing this inquiry rather sensible." Or so Sandy hoped.

Link made a show of looking at his computer for a minute. Then: "And you managed to carry out a rescue?"

"Yes."

"Personally?"

"Yes!"

"Ummmmmm." Link briefly pursed his lips. "Miss Swift . . . please bear with me here for a moment. Taking into account my accepting your reasoning up to now, wouldn't it have seemed much more sensible to involve the local authorities in whatever sort of 'rescue' you perpetrated?"

Sandy thought it over. "I don't know if I like the word 'perpetrated'."

"Sorry."

"It was . . . advised . . . that I bring in the local authorities," Sandy slowly admitted half to herself. In the back of her head she could clearly see Phyllis smirking at her. "But we had located my mother, plus the kidnappers. I felt that time was of the essence and made the decision to move on my own." She saw Link starting to form a response and pushed on. "I'm sorry if I stepped on some professional toes here. But it was my mother. And yes, I know that must still sound somewhat lame to you."

"Actually it doesn't," Link replied. "I mean, I understand the motivation. But quite a number of people could've been hurt. That number could've included you, as well as the people you were rescuing."

"Well . . . I wasn't hurt. Neither were Mom and the others." So there, she silently threw at him.

"Umm. It might interest you to know that we've picked up several people who were attacked an hour ago in a room at the New York Palace hotel. One of them, in fact, had to be peeled out of a very interesting adhesive cocoon. Sort of similar to what our riot robots employ." The look he gave Sandy was rather pointed.

Sandy excitedly leaned closer. "Then you have them in custody---"

"We've also had related reports of a break-in at the same hotel. Some damage done. A woman matching your description," and here his eyes flicked over Sandy again, "was clearly described as being involved."

"You've got the kidnappers," Sandy insisted.

"Local FBI are, right now, talking to them. I plan to coordinate their report with mine shortly." Once again the finger rose. "And before you begin delivering what would no doubt be a long list of suggestions and demands, give me a chance now to explain my side of the situation."

Sandy felt like racing on.

"Please."

Sandy clenched her hands into fists, willing herself to remain silent.

"Enterprises isn't the only organization with an interest in this affair," Link patiently explained. "We've had some contact with our . . . opposite numbers, let us say . . . over in Europe. Specifically, we've been interested in some large aircraft which arrived some time ago from Germany. We've had the Port Authority watching them. Standard procedure for incoming freight-carrying vehicles which seem to be less than forthcoming in supplying information."

Sandy slowly sat back. "Oho!"

"Oh?"

"It was your people who intercepted our computer inquiry into those planes."

"Ah-hhhhh." Link slowly nodded. "So that was you who was searching the databases. We'd been wondering."

"Those planes are definitely connected to the people who've been making the recent attacks on industrial facilities in Europe. They are also, quite possibly, the same people who made the attack in Ohio and at Enterprises, and the ones who kidnapped my Mom." Sandy blinked as something occurred to her. "And, in all this confusion---"

"They're all right," Link replied. "Presumably. By that I mean a small fleet of large Tommycars set down . . . somewhat illegally, I might add . . . on the southern part of Central Park and took on a small group of women who got out of a taxi. The Tommycars then lifted off and headed west. We presume their destination is Shopton."

"I could call and find out," Sandy offered.

"So can we," Link said. "And we will."

Sandy let out a long breath. One worry removed at least. Which still left: "Detective . . ."

"Harris Link," the man offered. The small smile reappeared. "Or Harrison. Or just plain 'Harris', if you'd prefer. Which I'd like."

Sandra Helene Swift you will NOT tingle, the warning voice said in Sandy's head. You're simply undergoing some severe emotional catharsis right now.

"Harris," she began.

The smile grew a bit.

"So my folks and friends are safe," Sandy patiently said. "You have a good amount of evidence on hand, including several people who should, with a fair amount of questioning, be easily traced to a variety of criminal activities both here and in Europe."

Harris considered the remark. "Yes."

"So! Why am I here? Under arrest?"

It took a few moments before Harris brought himself to answer. "You recall what the Anglican cleric Sydney Smith said about Truth? It is the handmaid of Justice."

And literate as well, Sandy thought. Oh dear. This could be bad.

"I'm going to go ahead and tell you the truth," Harris explained softly. "It's part of the reason this interview isn't being recorded. It's also why I've been asking if you wanted a lawyer present."

Sandy waited.

"As I said, we know of this investigation. My superiors, as well as those in the local FBI office, are not happy with the idea of major terrorists possibly operating here in the city. They especially aren't happy when such activity brings in the attention of an organization such as Enterprises."

Sandy's mouth dropped open. "Wait a---"

"Hold on," Harris said. "Let me finish. I'm not accusing Enterprises of anything. But you can't deny that both you and your brother have something of a reputation for . . . shall we say . . . stirring the pot rather hard."

"Now, at this moment, you haven't really been formally charged with anything. Yet. You have been listed as a 'person of interest' in regards to the break-in at the Palace, but there's been nothing officially linking you to any of that. Again: yet! All we have, right now, is you engaged in probable interference in an ongoing investigation. Under certain circumstances you could walk out of here within a few moments and be sent back to Shopton."

"I want to see the men you captured----"

"Whoa, whoa whoa!" Harris held up both hands. "I rather suspected that'd be your answer. Especially after reading a report concerning your activities in Ecuador some time back."

Sandy had the grace to blush slightly.

"I could have you released," Harris pointed out. "And then you'd be free to go about your business. Everything in me says that'd be an enormous mistake on my part. I could also go out of this room, officially connect the dots between you and the hotel break-in, and you'd be spending some time exchanging beauty secrets with some of the current residents in Tank C. I don't think you'd like that and, frankly, it's not what I'd want."

Sandy suspected she wouldn't care too much for the experience either. But she felt that Harris Link was holding a third door open and, in all honesty, she didn't feel like immediately leaping forward.

Still . . .

"What is it you want, Detec . . . Harris?"

The last time she saw a look like his on a human face was when Tom beat her at chess.

"I'd like for my department to be on the forefront of clearing this case up," he said. "I want to move ahead of the FBI and the Justice Department. We have a lot of evidence. But you have a lot more. Not only that, I suspect your involvement in this is a lot more personal than perhaps even you realize. What I want, Miss Swift . . ."

"Oh . . . go ahead and try `Sandy'."

His smile widened. "What I'd like . . . Sandy . . . is a handmaiden of Justice."

Sandy frowned a bit. "You want Truth?"

Harris slowly shook his head. "What I want, is bait!"

Chapter Eighteen: The Target.

Throughout the last five years of her life, Sandy had faced test flights which had become hazardous, high speed and high altitude ejections, space flight mishaps, kidnappings, self-destructing alien mechanisms, guns pointed at her, insane murderers on the Moon, black holes and killer cyborgs.

So she was now quietly asking herself why Harris Link's request was putting a particular chill inside her.

"A rather . . . unorthodox approach, Harris," she finally said. "Unorthodox, and I also suspect highly against standard procedure."

Standing up, Harris nodded. "You're correct in thinking so. But the people I investigate tend to be unorthodox in their methods. Continually stretching the envelope. In a city of over eight million people I can't afford the possibility that the envelope will be left behind." His hand reached down to tap the computer still on the table. "These people are using sophisticated weapons. They've managed to stymie some of the best law enforcement agencies in Europe, and now they're operating in this country. In this city! If they're going to play outside the rules, then I'm willing to kick the table over as well."

Despite herself, Sandy smiled. "Practicing your campaign speech for Police Commissioner?"

"Mmm, not quite." But Harris was also smiling a bit.

Leaning her chair back a bit, Sandy crossed her arms. "Okay, then. Why don't you tell me more about what you have in mind before I decide whether or not to call for help, or a lawyer, or both?"

"All right." Harris began a slow pacing about. "The first step is a sharing of information. You'd like to learn what the people we picked up know, and I'd like some further details from you. Fair enough?"

Sandy nodded.

"Okay. Now. This whole business starts with several European concerns being mysteriously attacked. The attacks have now moved to this country, with the first target being in Ohio, and the next one being Enterprises. Am I on solid ground so far?"

"One hundred per cent."

"Our antiterrorism unit was advised of the situation when the Ohio attack occurred, and then our readiness was upped when Enterprises was hit. We began our own investigation---"

"We'? Or you?"

Harris paused, and accompanied a small shrug with a rueful smile. "Well . . . I don't like taking all the credit. Anyway: our investigation uncovered the cargo planes arriving from Germany at around the same time the attacks began here. When we have large aircraft arriving and simply sitting on our airfields . . . neither unloading or taking on cargo . . . we tend to get more than a little suspicious." He nodded at Sandy. "You're up."

Sandy explained to Harris about how Enterprises had been attacked by advanced versions of Nazi experimental aircraft designs. She also related how the cargo planes which had probably delivered the attacking aircraft had been purchased by Weltnabel.

Harris frowned. "'World Navel'?"

"We suspect that Weltnabel is somehow associated with an organization known as Section Omphalos. They're a group of European scientists and intelligence operatives who've been trying to acquire what they believe is knowledge Enterprises has been keeping secret regarding the aliens we've been in contact with."

She was surprised to see the expression of calm humor slowly drain from Harris' face, replaced by a stony freezing of his features.

"I see," he murmured.

"I was involved with Omphalos people back in the Ecuador business---"

Harris silenced her with a sharp wave of his hand and turned away to stare at one of the blank walls.

When he spoke, his voice had a harder edge to it. "Out of all the facilities in this country, why was the one in Ohio attacked?"

Sandy was still wondering about the sudden change in Harris, but proceeded with an answer: "We believe that the attackers were searching for an expatriate European industrial thief by the name of Roland Blau."

"Blau," Harris whispered to the wall.

"The FBI is already aware of this."

"No doubt." Harris suddenly turned back to Sandy. "I have a theory as to why Enterprises was attacked next, but I want to hear your idea."

"Oh?" Sandy blinked a bit as she collected her thoughts. "Well . . . other than making a serious attempt to inflict damage, the attackers also stole some samples from one of our labs."

"Samples?"

"Experimental engineering nanotech my brother invented which has the ability to create a sort of self-healing metal."

"Oh." Harris slowly nodded to himself. "Oh."

Something was circling around inside Sandy's heart. "Harris, what's wrong?"

"It's nothing," he said quickly. He caught himself and closed his eyes, taking a breath. "Okay, and that's not quite the truth. I apologize, Sandy. It's just that I . . . tend to have something of a raw spot in regards to your alien friends."

Not exactly my friends, Sandy wanted to say. "Oh?"

Harris let out a long sigh. "It's . . . I lost my mother when Nestria arrived."

"Oh!" Sandy sat in her chair with the sensation of her insides draining out of her. "Oh!" It had been years since the Space Friends sent Nestria to Earth, and Sandy had almost managed to forget some of the catastrophic effects its initial pass had inflicted. Almost, but not quite.

She had naturally encountered many of the "Nestria Victims" before now. So many that the act of apologizing had almost become a regular ritual with her and the other members of her family. After all these years it was finally reaching the point where such encounters were beginning to space themselves out to a semblance of rarity.

On occasion, though . . .

"Harris---"

"And I'm not accusing or condemning you, Sandy," Harris broke in, his face finally softening. "I'm certainly not one of the whackos who believed that your family actually wanted something like Nestria to happen."

"I'm glad," Sandy said simply. It was all she could think of saying.

"Not only that, but my brother is a scientist currently working at the Swift installation on Nestria."

Brain cells rapidly connected inside Sandy's head. "Your brother is the head of the Xenobotany Section. Ah-hhh . . . Simon Link!"

Harris nodded, smiling.

"Talk about synchronicity. My brother raves about his work."

"Yeah, well, he was smart enough to stay away from police work. Anyway," he continued, "getting back to our original subject---"

"Yes. You said you had a theory as to why Enterprises was attacked."

"I do," Harris replied, sitting back down, "and, as much as I'm enjoying the present company, I wish I was talking to your Sherman Ames about this."

"So do I."

"Mmmm . . . that will come later. But anyway, you said the people who attacked Enterprises only took some samples of your brother's nanotech."

Sandy nodded.

"And that's all they took?" Harris stared at her sharply. "Just the samples?"

Sandy thought for a moment. "I . . . guess so."

"No computer records? No instructions? No files from your brother's office?"

"None that I know of. Of course, we've still been picking up the pieces . . ."

"The reason I'm asking this," Harris said, "is because simply stealing samples of something strikes me as being a bit strange."

"Simply', the man says."

"Okay," replied Harris. "Maybe the wrong way to put it. But follow me on this for a bit. You said this thing your brother invented was still highly experimental. What good would it do for someone to just grab samples of it without also grabbing information on how to use it, or manufacture it?"

Sandy opened her mouth. Closed it. Opened it again. "Ah-hhh, perhaps these people already have someone in place who could analyze the samples and do all of that."

"Easily? Someone on your brother's level?"

Sandy drummed her fingers on the table top. Admittedly, Harris had a point. "But they had to know exactly what they were searching for. Obviously they had a need for the nanotech."

"Oh, I agree. But not quite the same need you or your brother suspect."

Sandy gazed steadily into the brown eyes. "You have the floor, Detective Link."

"I know several things about your Ecuador adventure," Harris explained. "Not a whole lot. Quite a bit of it was classified above my security rating. But I learned enough to realize that your opponents in Ecuador . . . Section Omphalos? . . . suffered quite a setback in their plans. Not only that, but they suffered it directly at your hands."

And this, Sandy thought, is why I've been feeling scared. "Go on."

"I'm not a scientist," Harris said. "I'm a cop. Admittedly a high-level one, but still just a cop. I don't know all that much about industrial espionage. What I do know, and understand, are motivations. Revenge, for one."

Sandy stared at him.

He ticked off a finger. "The attacks in Europe. All this power these people had at their disposal, and yet comparatively little was stolen. Just enough, I suspect, to help build up their technical base." Another finger. "The attack in Ohio. Its purpose to pick up a professional criminal." Another finger. "The kidnapping of your mother." Another finger. "The attack on Enterprises. To just steal nanotech?"

"You forgot the missile attack on me when I was traveling to Ohio," Sandy pointed out in a small voice.

"Not quite," Harris replied. "Actually I was waiting to see if you'd bring that up. But it all comes together to achieve the same end. Your opponents wanted to provoke a response. Stir the waters. Beat the bushes and bring their objective out into the open."

"Their objective being . . ."

"C'mon, Sandy. I know you're not an idiot. You and I are both thinking the same thing now."

Sandy let a silence drag on for a few moments before replying. "The attackers are part of radical elements within Section Omphalos who want revenge for Ecuador."

"To be precise: they want to kill you."

"Harris---"

"They've already made several attempts," Harris pushed on. "Maybe these weren't meant to do the job. Maybe they're setting up something big."

"Harris, if someone wanted to kill me, there're much simpler ways of going about it."

"Like the sniper attack in Ohio," Harris said. "Once again, I think these people are setting up something big. Some sort of über-scheme. But you're the cherry on top. You're one of the prime goals in this plot."

Sandy let her chin drop to her chest. "Oh Lord . . ."

"And that, Sandy, is why I need you. If you're really in the gunsights of these people, then that means they'll be starting to crowd around you. Coming more into the open." Harris had been smiling, and the smile now grew. "And, when they do, I plan to be there."

Sandy raised her face to glare at him. "Using me as a stalking horse."

"Even so," agreed Harris.

"Hmph! Think pretty highly of yourself, don't you?"

"Hey!" Harris spread his hands out. "I'm the best there is."

"Harris---"

"And now for my part of the bargain," the detective said, standing up. "Let's go look in on our captives."

"About time," sighed Sandy. "And, if possible, I'd really like a chance to call home and talk to the folks. And Sherman Ames."

"But of course," Harris said, opening the door to the interrogation room and stepping back to let her pass. "And a lot of those details have probably already been put in motion."

Sandy glanced back at him. "Oh?"

"What I mean is that one of the people from your New York party remained behind to clear up paperwork and, if necessary, post bail for you. Fortunately, I don't think any bail will need to be posted."

Sandy brightened. "Good old Phyllis! I knew she'd come through."

"Ah-hhhhh, it wasn't quite Miss Newton."

"Then who---"

"Hel-LOOOOOOOO!"

Sandy froze, then slowly turned back to Harris. "I've momentarily forgotten. Does New York still carry the death penalty on its books?"

Chapter Nineteen: An Airstrike, With Cocktails.

"Mrs. Applepound," Sandy said, smiling around gritted teeth. "What a surprise!"

"You poor child," the older woman cried, quickly moving forward and crushing Sandy close to her in an all-enveloping hug. "Locked in this unsanitary building all this time," she continued, rocking Sandy back and forth. "Facing Lord alone only knows what sort of degradations." The last accompanied a hostile look in Harrison Link's direction before she swung an arm out and pointed an imperious finger at a nearby group of uniformed officers. "You there. You lot! This innocent girl has doubtless been through utter Hell. Quickly . . . Some hot chicken soup and E.G. Marshall!"

"Mmpphh . . . mmmphh . . ."

"Oh my Lord, the girl's practically incoherent due to her ordeal." Mrs. Applepound favored Harris with another smoking glance. "You vicious fiend."

"Actually, I think Sandy's trying to say something," Harris calmly replied. "Or breathe. Possibly both."

Mrs. Applepound allowed some distance to appear between her ample bosom and Sandy. "Yes, lovie! What is it?"

Sandy spent a few seconds filling her lungs before talking. "Mrs. A. What are you doing here?"

"Extricating you from the calaboose, naturally."

Sandy was still trying to breathe steadily, wondering if Mrs. Applepound bathed in frangipani. "Whew! OK. So! Please don't get me wrong or anything, Mrs. A. I mean, I am grateful and all." Sandy paused to swallow. "But why you?"

"Simplicity itself," the other woman explained. "The emphasis was on insuring that your mother and her friends be returned to the safety of Shopton as soon as humanly possible. Not only that, but no one else in the group had access to ready funds, plus a necessary familiarity with New York City. This made me the natural choice to remain behind and see to your welfare."

Sandy sighed. "Your logic is, as usual, quite impeccable."

"I wasn't Queen of Nu Pi Kappa at Beardsley Women's College for nothing," Mrs. Applepound proudly remarked.

"No doubt." Sandy wearily ran a hand through her hair. "OK. Let's go look at these prisoners," she said to Harris. "And can I please have my stuff back now?"

Harris passed over a large manila envelope which he had received from the desk sergeant. "And this way to where we've got the kidnappers."

"Yummy," Sandy murmured, reaching into the envelope for her Snooper and security amulet. "Come along, Mrs. A. You should find this interesting."

The threesome left the area just moments ahead of an officer who entered from the opposite end with a covered bowl. "Who ordered the chicken soup?"

* * * * *

"Well," Sandy said, moments later, "that's them."

With Harris and Mrs. Applepound, she was staring through the one-way glass panel into an interrogation room. On the other side stood the two men who had been at the New York Palace.

As she was no longer clinging to the side of a building, or busily trying to avoid being shot, Sandy was able to inspect the kidnappers at a more leisurely pace. Unfortunately, rather than being swarthy, sinister types, the pair were actually rather ordinary looking adult men. One of them, in fact, mildly reminded Sandy of the safety deposit box clerk at Shopton Federal Credit Union.

Now that'd be all we need, she thought. Total war with the Credit Union.

"I'm presuming they've already been questioned and fingerprinted up the wazoo."

"The same routine we put you through," Harris replied, nodding at the men in the room. "Gilbert Danes and Frank Purcell. Minor-league players. Nothing more serious in their records so far than receiving stolen merchandise---"

"And kidnapping."

Harris sighed. "Yeah . . . that. Funny thing is, the people they were supposed to have kidnapped abruptly left town without bothering to file charges."

Sandy winced. "Oops!"

"Which is putting it mildly. So far they've been sticking to their story about being attacked while in their hotel room," Harris continued calmly. "Unless we can come up with a substantial charge against them, they might end up walking out of here."

Sandy stared wide-eyed at Harris.

He continued to gaze through the glass. "And I'm just tempted enough to let it happen."

"The hell? They kidnapped my Mom!"

"You have no proof," Harris replied calmly, still looking through the glass. "All you have are two men holding your mother and her friends in a hotel room. Admittedly that qualifies as kidnapping, but a good defense lawyer might be able to work with that. Especially if the supposed victims fled not only the scene, but the town---"

"We wanted to get my Mom to safety---"

"Especially if a defense lawyer should happen to find out about a certain blonde attacker who herself broke the law in the course of freeing her mother."

Sandy shut up.

Harris looked at her. "I'm on your side. Believe me. Right now my people are trying to figure out if your Mom and her friends can supply depositions which would be sufficient enough to hold these guys if we wanted to."

"And you want to let them walk," Sandy said, her eyes narrowing.

"Figure it out," Harris replied. "Right now these guys are our only solid lead towards the real brains behind the kidnapping. Not to mention the people responsible for the attacks in Europe and here. We could possibly learn more by letting them loose and closely tailing them than we could by hanging on to them."

Sandy sighed. "Haven't your people learned anything yet? I mean, besides their names and previous records?"

"From what we've been able to figure out so far in the initial interviews, these guys were hired on an outsource basis. My guess is that they're not directly connected to whoever's behind the attacks, but they still might be able to contact them."

"But the man I was chasing was the same one who tried to kill me in Ohio. He may have been their direct contact." Sandy glanced back at the men in the room. "And I guess neither of those guys in there have revealed any connection with Germany, or Europe or anything like that?"

"Nothing so far. I'd really like to talk to your Sherman Ames about this, if he's available."

Sandy nodded. "By now he should also have those papers I managed to take from the hotel room. Mmmmm . . . let me call Sherman and set something up."

"Fair enough." Harris looked at his watch. "It's getting sort of late. Can I make a suggestion?"

"Why stop now?"

Harris smiled. "Some supper. On me."

* * * * *

"Goodness," Mrs. Applepound remarked as the waiter seated her, "your budget must be quite generous, Detective Link."

Sandy was inclined to agree. When Harris had suggested supper she had a vague notion of gulping down a bagful of White Castle sliders somewhere outside the precinct building. Instead, she was now thirty-four stories above Times Square, enjoying the early evening view from a table at the elegant Sky Room. "Fighting terrorism obviously pays well."

"It carries some fringe benefits," Harris replied, studying a menu. "I suggest . . . cocktails. And perhaps the Go Green platter. It has quite a bit, including baba ghanoush."

Mrs. Applepound blinked. "Wasn't baba ghanoush a song by the Who?"

"Baba O'Riley'," Sandy and Harris said at the same time. They both looked at each other across the table. Meanwhile, Mrs. Applepound began softly murmuring something which included the words "teenage wasteland".

"You really didn't have to take us here, Harris," Sandy said to him.

"But I insist," Harris replied. "I wanted very much to improve your opinion of New York City."

Sandy felt a smile rising in her. "I'm managing to enjoy parts of it. Oh," she continued, noticing the waiter. "I'll have a . . . Irish Latte."

"Sally take my hand'," Mrs. Applepound softly sang. Then: "Oh! My turn. Ah-hhhh . . . let's see. Something with gin in it. Ah! I'll have a Mile-High, please."

"Usual for me, Jacob," Harris finished, handing over his menu. The waiter nodded and smoothly moved away.

"So," Sandy said, making herself comfortable, "New York City cops have their 'usuals' at chi-chi rooftop lounges?"

"When they're involved in a very serious case. Like right now . . . Oh!" He reached into his pocket, pulling out his computer and pressing a button, frowning briefly at the screen. "I need to make a private call to my superior. Do me a favor and get back in touch with your people at Shopton while I take care of this."

He left the table to move further into the lounge; Sandy watching his movements.

"I must confess, my opinion of him has changed considerably," Mrs. Applepound remarked.

"He seems competent," Sandy admitted.

"Quite handsome, too."

Sandy slowly turned her head to glare at the author. "Mrs. A . . ."

"Just an observation, lovie."

"We're together on business."

Mrs. Applepound was regarding the view. "Yes. And he seems rather intent on his work."

Summoning up as much dignity as she could muster, Sandy touched her security amulet, making certain it was still operating properly. Although she was too far away from Enterprises to register directly on Sherman's security monitors, she knew the amulet's signal was being received up at the Swift space station and relayed back down to Shopton.

She then took her Snooper, snapping the device apart into its two separate halves. After testing the emergency signal/homing device function, she switched on the communicator. "Hi, folks. Back on line here."

"And about time," her father's voice replied. "We were getting ready to launch a return expedition, but the New York Police contacted us and explained you were assisting in their investigation."

Sandy wasn't too certain, but she felt she heard an interesting emphasis on the word 'assisting'. "So! Mom and the others doing fine?"

"Everyone's OK, and we're debating whether or not to throw a party in your honor or ground you forever when you get back. Maybe both."

"Dad---"

"We're just glad to be hearing from you again. Did Mrs. Applepound find you OK?"

Sandy assured him and went into an abbreviated explanation of what had occurred since she had left the group to go manhunting. "Is Sherman there?"

"Yes, and so's your brother, your Mom, Bud and the Nospes."

"Put Sherman on and have everyone else listen in. I've got Detective Harrison Link coming back in a moment and he'll want to exchange notes. Ah! And here he is now."

With an apologetic smile, Harris was settling back at the table. Making adjustments to her Snooper, Sandy put it down on the table, positioning it so that the three of them could hear and speak to the others.

Sherman's voice appeared, and both he and Harris immediately launched into a highly technical string of police procedural legalese concerning the kidnapping. It was eventually agreed that, with the assistance of the State Department, and given the facts surrounding the attack on Enterprises, it would be possible to arrange for Mrs. Swift, Mrs. Newton and Mrs. Nospe to examine and identify the two detainees via a telejector link. The women could then submit an electronic deposition which, Harris felt, would be sufficient to keep Danes and Purcell in custody until further charges could be brought.

Sandy quietly watched Harris and decided not to mention the detective's idea of letting Danes and Purcell loose. In her heart of hearts she felt Harris had a good idea. But too many leads had already slipped through her fingers, and she desperately wanted Danes and Purcell right where they were until every available nugget of information could be squeezed from them.

To hide her disquiet, Sandy allowed her gaze to wander out in the direction of the Hudson River. They were high enough to enjoy the clarity of the growing evening sky. The Moon hadn't yet risen, but Nestria was still visible . . .

And so was a rather peculiar, spindle-shaped cloud which suddenly seemed to be rising up into the sky from beyond the Hudson. Sandy frowned at it, and then her mouth fell open. "Oh God!"

The cloud lengthened, rapidly forming into a tornado which began moving in towards the city.

Towards her.

Chapter Twenty: Storm Chaser.

"Not good," Sandy muttered. Then louder. "Not good!"

She had the attention of both Harris and Mrs. Applepound. "What?" Harris asked, turning his head to see where she was staring. "Oh! Is that . . ."

"It is," Sandy said, standing up quickly, scooping her Snooper up off the table, "and we are so out of here. Now!"

Mrs. Applepound had also spotted the tornado. "Oh dear . . ."

Still watching the storm, Sandy began moving into the lounge, heading for the elevator. "Move it, Mrs. A., or your next book will be *Gone With The Wind!*"

The tornado was weaving about, almost hovering over the Lincoln Tunnel entrance. Its path had slowed, but it was still heading inexorably towards the Sky Room. Its lower portion hadn't touched down yet, but hung high above the city, ready to drop and destroy.

Sandy suddenly managed to swallow some of her panic and came to a halt, her eyes still on the storm. "Whoa! We can't risk the elevators if that thing's gonna hit."

"We can't stay here," Harris replied.

"No. But how does it . . . how do they know where to send it? How do they know I'm . . . here!" She suddenly raised her Snooper and spoke into it. "Sherman! Dad! Tom!"

"Sandy, what---"

"Quiet! We've got a sudden storm problem here. Sherman! The signal from my security amulet. Is it still broadcasting?"

"Yes, but---"

"Block it! Switch it off. Divert it. Something!"

"Sandy, I can't. It has a fail-safe which allows it to broadcast no matter what---"

Growling, Sandy quickly removed the amulet from around her neck, turning it so that the battery access was visible. Knowing something of the way the amulet was constructed, she struggled to twist the body of the small, metallic disc. Her efforts were rewarded as, moments later, the device popped open, revealing the battery compartment.

Reaching in with her fingers, Sandy pulled the battery out of the amulet.

"Sandy! Your amulet signal's just dropped off---"

Nodding, Sandy tucked both the amulet and the battery in a pocket. "They've still got a general idea of my last location," she said to Harris. "Get these people out of here."

"Always wanted to do this," the detective muttered, pulling out his wallet. He held it high, letting it fall open to reveal his badge. "NYPD," he said loudly to the people in the lounge. "Counterterrorism Unit! Everyone quickly clear out of this place now. Please use the stairwells and head for the street level."

Sandy noted that Harris had also pulled out his service pistol, holding it at the ready. Fortunately, practically all of the patrons and employees in the lounge had spotted the approaching tornado, and most of them were already hurriedly making for the exits.

Tom's voice was chirping loudly from the Snooper. "Sandy? Sandy?"

"I think the tornado's been somehow tracking my amulet signal," Sandy said to her brother. "It's slowed down, but it's still heading towards me. We're getting out of here."

"Hurry!"

"Don't worry. We're running as fast as we can. Now." Lowering the Snooper she motioned towards the nearest exit with her head. "Let's roll, people."

Her companions needed no further urging and they joined the busy throng squeezing through the exit door and moving down the thirty-floor flights of stairs. Fortunately they had been among the last, so there was little worry of someone having been left behind.

Such a thought ran through Sandy's mind when, having reached the landing for the 29th Floor, she suddenly felt the building shake, and distantly heard a crashing sound come from above. "Oh!"

Both Harris and Mrs. Applepound paused to look up. "That could've been us," he muttered.

Sandy didn't feel like dwelling on the possibility, but resumed helping Mrs. Applepound move further down the stairs.

"You certain that thing was tracking your amulet?"

"Only thing I could think of," Sandy said, holding onto the stairwell railing as another ominous shake rattled the building. "The only other possibility could've been my Snooper. But the amulets are tuned to track specific people, whereas the Snoopers aren't. I'm presuming, of course, that the tornado was meant for me."

"Fair guess," muttered Harris.

"But, speaking of communications, shouldn't you be---"

"Damn!" Reaching into his pocket, Harris pulled out his computer, keying the link to his station. "Harris, Unit CT. Priority track. Reporting 10-75 my location. Advise immediate 10-78. 11-42 and 43. Code 13 my location. Repeat: code 13! All units respond immediate. Also request 11-48 soonest!"

Sandy couldn't help but notice that Mrs. Applepound also had her computer out, but was holding it so that it could listen in to Harris' dialogue. "Technical notes, Mrs. A?"

"Yes!"

"Not the same when it's real life, huh?"

"No, dear. Much more thrilling!"

Soon they reached the bottom of the stairwell, joining the crowd gathered in the lobby of the Marriott Fairfield Inn. Carefully working their way through (assisted by multiple showings of Harris' badge), they soon reached an area where they could clearly see that 40th Street was liberally littered with debris from what was presumably the remains of the Sky Room.

Seeing the wreckage, Harris sighed. "This is gonna put me on the list for a lot of restaurants in the area."

Noticing several people standing outside on the sidewalk, and pointing upwards, Sandy nudged Harris. "C'mon."

Carefully stepping outside, Sandy looked up into the night sky. Of the tornado there was no sign. But clearly visible was a word written in glowing green gaseous letters: SURRENDER!

Holding a palm to her forehead, Mrs. Applepound peered up. "Shouldn't that be followed by the word `Dorothy'?"

"I've got a feeling what the next word's supposed to be," Sandy muttered. Still staring at the sky message, she lifted her Snooper. "Kids? You listening?"

"Yes," Sherman replied. "I'm gonna presume---"

"We're still unhurt and doing well. I'm afraid the place we were in can't say the same, but it looks like no one got caught in it. The tornado was meant mainly as a warning of sorts."

"Sandy, I've got your father and the others listening in, as well as watching the news feed. We can see the message in the air."

"What I want to know is, can you spot the aircraft which sent the tornado? Can you track it?"

A pause, and Sandy heard a muted exchange of voices. Harris and Mrs. Applepound leaned in closer to listen.

Then: "Sandy, we're trying our best. But those aircraft have demonstrated a considerable stealth capability. Tom thinks---"

"Listen. That skywriting trick might help give us a clue. Get Tom on the line."

Another pause. Then: "Yeah, Sandy?"

"Correct me if I'm wrong, Tom, but don't skywriters use some sort of special substance to create letters? I know you looked into it when you originally created the Omnicopter."

"Yeah. Skywriters use a special low viscosity oil---"

"Can the space station still perform atomic tracking from orbit?"

"Ah-hhhhh! I see what you're saying. Sandy, the station can do a scan. But at that altitude, and given the nature of what we're tracking, it probably couldn't follow the aircraft completely."

"See if you can get a bearing somehow. I'll stay online here."

"Right."

Lowering the Snooper, Sandy stared about. "Police car . . . police car . . ."

Harris snorted. "Got several to choose from." With a nod he indicated the police and emergency vehicles which had already appeared at the scene, their flashing lights painting the surroundings.

"Great! Now! Am I mistaken, or does NYPD employ Swift-based forensic field analysis equipment?"

"We've bought heavily from your people."

"I specifically need a portable tracker. A Bloodhound, if you've got one handy."

Harris looked around, then began moving about the wreckage, heading towards a van marked NYPD FIELD HQ.

Sandy was surprised to feel a tap on her shoulder, and she turned to look at Mrs. Applepound. The older woman seemed uncharacteristically solemn. "Mrs. A?"

"I think you need to be careful."

"Huh? `Bout what?"

"About . . . ask me later, dear." Mrs. Applepound quickly leaned away and resumed her usual pose. Sandy turned back to see Harris returning to them. In one hand he held the handle of an object the size of a suitcase.

"Here you go," he said, putting the object down and opening the top.

Sandy reached for the device, unhooking the hand-held scanner which she then raised up, pointing at the floating word SURRENDER. The letters were already dissipating, and the word was becoming quite blurry.

"It's gonna be iffy at this range," Sandy said half to herself.

"Sandy?"

Sandy once again listened to the Snooper. "Yeah, Tom?"

"Can't get a decent reading from this end. Best we can do is a current distance of . . . 187 miles from us."

"Right. Tell me what you can get from these readings." Putting down the scanner, Sandy touched several buttons on the instrument panel for the Bloodhound, finally inserting her own computer into the upload slot. "Sending them . . . now!"

"Ummmm . . . brief trail. Very brief. Can only follow a little bit before it dissipates, but I'm getting a bearing of thirty-three degrees true, forty-seven degrees magnetic."

Pulling her computer from the Bloodhound, Sandy tapped several buttons, staring at the results which appeared in the form of a map of eastern New York. A red line extended upwards, heading through Yonkers, passing west of Danbury, then east of Poughkeepsie and further north, on near Albany and beyond. "OK!"

"Not too much to go on," Tom admitted.

Sandy agreed. "I'd give a pretty to know the maximum range of those aircraft."

"You and me both. Listen . . . Bud's practically hopping from one foot to the other, wanting to head back to New York and pick you up. He's got plenty of people wishing the same."

"I wouldn't mind sleeping in my own bed either," Sandy said. "But I've got both a New York detective and a best-selling author currently watching over me. It's late, and I'll stay here before deciding what to do tomorrow."

"Well . . ."

"You guys keep working on your end and let me know what you come up with. We'll compare notes when I get back."

A pause followed which was long enough to make Sandy wonder if something had happened to the communications link.

Then: "Okay, we'll play it that way for now. Are you gonna plug your amulet back in?"

"No. They managed to track me once with it. I'll keep my Snooper handy."

"That's . . . not sitting too well around here. But I guess it's better than having you run around. We'll get back to work."

"Thanks, Tom. Out here."

Switching off her Snooper, Sandy noticed both Harris and Mrs. Applepound watching her steadily. "Now what?"

"We haven't known each other very long," Harris remarked calmly. "But somehow I don't think you went through all of that just to stay put here."

"I've known you longer," Mrs. Applepound added, "and I agree."

Sandy was patting herself here and there, making certain all her gear was still in place. "Well, the both of you happen to be right. I've got a fairly definite bearing on where that tornado plane went, and I want to follow the trail while it's still fairly hot."

Harris nodded half to himself. "Uh huh. Sort of figured something like that would happen. That's why, back when I was calling for reinforcements, I added a request for personal transportation." He pointed down the sidewalk to where a bronze Buick LaCrosse. "Presuming, of course, that you don't mind some company."

"Frankly, I wouldn't mind."

"Good. Especially seeing as how I've got the keys. Let me go tell some of the others I'll be off." With a smile, Harris moved towards a nearby crowd of uniformed officers.

Another pluck on her sleeve. "Yes, Mrs. A?"

"I can understand your doing this, Sandy."

"I appreciate that. But you really don't have to accompany us on this trip."

"Oh, but I intend to. I think you're making something of a big mistake."

"Mrs. Applepound, this isn't the first time I've---"

"I don't mean your wandering off into adventure," the other woman broke in, once again looking solemn. Chewing nervously at her lower lip, she decided to continue. "You were wondering how the attacker managed to locate your position."

"Yeah. My amulet---"

"Might not have been the cause."

Sandy blinked. "But that's the only way I could see for someone to somehow track me."

"Sandra---"

"How else could that tornado plane have found me? No one else knew I was gonna be up in the Sky Room except you and Harris."

Mrs. Applepound slowly nodded. "Indeed! Myself . . . and Detective Link."

"You're saying . . ."

"I'm simply pointing out that the tornado plane just happened to arrive on the scene and track you down---"

"Yeah!"

"---shortly after Detective Link excused himself from the table to make a phone call."

Chapter Twenty-One: Road Trip.

They left New York City, leaving Manhattan on the Henry Hudson Parkway to travel north, following the Hudson River towards Yonkers. Sandy sat in the front seat alongside Harris, with Mrs. Applepound occupying the rear.

The detective glanced over at his passenger. "You're being kind of quiet."

"I know," Sandy replied, trying to shake her head clear and ignore the thoughts running through it. Especially the thought planted by Mrs. Applepound (of all people) about the possibility that Harris could be one of the ones involved in the tornado attacks. It just didn't seem right. Harris was a police officer. He was a detective devoted to fighting terrorism. He was . . . he was . . .

And he was also the man who had showed up just as Sandy had been closing in on the sniper, allowing him to escape. He was also the man who had suggested letting Danes and Purcell go free. There was also the business of his leaving to make a phone call just before the attack on the Sky Room.

Sandy shook her head again.

"It's not that I don't necessarily need conversation," Harris continued. "And, ordinary I'd enjoy nothing more than escorting two charming ladies on an evening drive through the country. But it might help matters if I had more of an idea of where we're going."

"Sorry," Sandy apologized, reaching for her computer and switching it on. "We've got a bearing on the direction the plane that attacked the Sky Room was traveling. Now . . . this may all be conjecture, but let's presume that the pilots of the tornado planes are so secure in their stealth capability that they could afford to fly a fairly straight line back to their home base."

Harris slowly nodded. "Granted."

"We know the tornado planes aren't using the cargo planes they arrived in as a base, or else your people watching the airport would've spotted them."

"True."

"So! We're currently following the course the tornado plane took and are trying to locate where the attackers are operating from."

Harris nodded again. "Okay. That makes sense. The problem, though, is that we don't know how far along that heading our friend has traveled. We could end up in Quebec, or further north."

"Ah!" Sandy began tapping on the buttons of her computer, touching various icons on the display screen as they appeared, and struggling to keep her eyes open. "But this is where the magic of information technology comes in. Not only is my computer connected to the Internet, but it also has a link to Sherman's custom-designed security analysis data research subroutines, as well as an open account with the Pierce Library in Austin. A careful . . ." and Sandy now yawned hugely, ". . . examination of available facts should reveal something useful."

"First: we will presume that, along with the airports in New York City, our attackers wouldn't want an airfield that's currently in active commercial use. QED, they'd probably be looking for some sort of abandoned air facility."

Mrs. Applepound had leaned closer and was peering over Sandy's shoulder at the computer screen. "But there must be dozens of abandoned airfields in the country."

"One thousand, four hundred and sixty-three of them in the United States and Puerto Rico," Sandy replied.

Next to her, Harris' mouth made an O. "I'll need to stop for gas."

Sandy almost smiled. "Perhaps not. If we narrow our search to abandoned airfields along our current heading, we find . . . only three." Sandy studied the information being displayed before her, struggling to keep another yawn down. "Oh! And this is interesting."

"What?" This from both Harris and Mrs. Applepound.

"One of the airfields is reported as having once been used for wind-tunnel research back during World War II," Sandy remarked. "Black Pond Airfield. Near a small town named Farmers Mills." Touching an icon, Sandy accessed the directional function in her computer. "If we take the Taconic State Parkway when we reach Mount Pleasant, then Black Pond is only roughly another hour's driving."

"Black Pond . . ."

"An abandoned airfield which once carried out wind tunnel experiments," Sandy mused aloud. "Just the sort of place I'd want to hide out in." Losing a struggle with herself she released another enormous yawn. "Why am I so tired?"

"May I present a theory?" asked Mrs. Applepound.

"Yeah."

"Today you flew to New York, located your kidnapped mother, broke into---"

"Mrs. A!"

"Oh!" Mrs. Applepound blinked. "Almost orgot-fay the oliceman-pay. Ah-hhh . . . you located your kidnapped mother. Then you hmm-hmm-hmmm, after which you hmm-hmm-hmmmed down the side of the hmm-hmmm. You then hmm-hmmm-hmmmed, then you hmm-hmmmed down the street, after which you ended up in jail. Then we had supper, were attacked, and are now way up past our bedtime."

"You know," Harris remarked, "we have strict laws against hmm-hmm-hmmm in New York City."

"You need sleep, Sandra," Mrs. Applepound pointed out firmly.

"I must be tired," Sandy agreed. "You're actually making more and more sense. But we're so close."

"And we'll still be close after some sleep and a fresh start in the morning," Harris assured her. "Mrs. Applepound's right. First decent place I find we'll pull over and call it a night."

A bit more driving found them arriving in Elmsford where, after a bit of exploring, Harris pulled into the parking lot of the Saw Mill River Hotel. All three of them went into the office to register, and in spite of her exhaustion, Sandy couldn't help but smile at the way Mrs. Applepound remained close by when Harris requested two rooms.

"A pity we couldn't have arranged for fresh clothes," Mrs. Applepound was murmuring as she led the way towards their rooms. "As a writer, of course, I'm very much accustomed to living on the fly, to so speak. Sandra, on the other hand---"

"I'll be all right," Sandy said tiredly. "As long as the room has a halfway decent shower and plenty of soap. Some sleep and a wash-up and I'll be ready for anything." Passing the key to Mrs. Applepound, she allowed the older woman to open the door and go inside.

Which left her standing alone with Harris. Sandy turned to gaze into the warm eyes within the face half-hidden in the shadows, aware of how close he was.

"Playing firmly outside the rules at last . . . Detective Link."

"But you'll have to agree we're getting results," he gently told her.

Sandy slowly nodded. "True."

He was moving even closer. "I'd say we're making considerable progress."

It's a trap, Sandy told herself. Oh yes! It is!

"I'm still here," Mrs. Applepound loudly announced.

Harris immediately snapped back, and Sandy felt as if an ice cube had been dropped down her shorts.

"Your bed's all made up, Sandra," Mrs. Applepound said, poking her head out the doorway, her eyes pointedly fixed on Harris.

"Yes, Mrs. A. On my way, Mrs. A." Sandy turned to give Harris a smile. "See you in the morning, Harris." Still smiling, Sandy entered her room.

Inside, Mrs. Applepound was rather firmly fluffing a pillow.

Sighing, Sandy closed the door. "Circumstantial evidence, Mrs. A."

"Oh yes! The cemeteries of the world are filled with people who died because of circumstantial evidence." Mrs. Applepound flounced the pillow down on the bed.

"You thought he was rather handsome."

"I've changed my mind." Sitting down on the bed, Mrs. Applepound began tugging off her shoes. "After all, think of my position."

"Your position?"

"If you start becoming romantically involved with Detective Link, think of all the rewriting I'll have to do on my current manuscript."

"You actually think an enemy would be that resourceful, and that devious?"

"I'll just remind you, Young Lady, who it was who was responsible for creating your two most deadliest foes: the White Pongo Savages from Fort Worth, as well as the Seventh-Day Rotorrootarians."

"Hmph!" Going to the bathroom, Sandy shook her head. "Well . . . just keep in mind that, if we're judging people based on circumstances, then Harris could wind up having quite a bit of company."

"Oh?"

"When Enterprises was attacked, the people responsible also stole some nanotech from my brother."

"Well, yes. Granted."

"Uh huh." Sandy leaned her head out of the bathroom to stare at the other woman. "And I just recently remembered something Tom mentioned when you arrived at Enterprises. Namely: that the plot of your latest book dealing with my brother involved stolen nanotech." Sandy primly nodded. "Pleasant dreams, Mrs. A."

* * * * *

The next morning found the trio driving up the Taconic State Parkway, passing alongside scenery such as the Hardscrabble Wilderness Area, Mohansic Lake and crossing the New Croton Reservoir.

"Well," Harris remarked, "as investigative trips go, I've got to admit this is fairly nice going."

"It is appropriately rustic," Mrs. Applepound agreed.

I could be in a car with an enemy agent, Sandy was thinking. Maybe two. Who would be the most dangerous? A highly-skilled police detective trained in counterterrorist tactics, or a hack writer?

Her ruminations were interrupted by a beeping from inside her pockets. Reaching in, she pulled out her Snooper.

"You did say you were gonna call," Harris gently reminded her.

"Yeah," admitted Sandy, "and they're not gonna like what I'm gonna tell them." Collecting her thoughts, she twisted the barrel of the communicator, switching it on. "I'm here."

"You didn't say `Open Channel D'," Mrs. Applepound remarked, receiving a shush wave in return from Sandy.

"So how's it going?" Bud asked. "Sleep okay?"

"I'm . . . fine," Sandy replied, doing her best to ignore the soft whistling of a funeral march from the back seat. "I'm still with the police officer who escorted me yesterday, and Mrs. Applepound."

"Good. Oh, and you'll be interested to know we've come up with something here. Your friend Purcell, who's still locked up?"

"Yeah."

"Turns out he's got several other interests as well. Among them is car collecting. Especially atomicars."

Sandy felt her eyebrows rising. "Oh-hhhh . . ."

"Especially atomicars which end up being fitted with missiles."

"Oh . . . Boy!"

"That's pretty much been the reaction at this end. Sherman's people finally connected the dots a couple of hours ago. Obviously this puts Purcell in a considerably different light, and the FBI's gonna be asking him some very pointed questions. Seems that quite a lot of people tend to frown on air-to-air missile attacks occurring in American airspace."

"Yeah, and I'm definitely one of them."

"Figured as much. So . . . when you want me to come pick you up?"

Sandy looked helplessly at Harris.

"I'm driving," the detective told her.

She glanced back at Mrs. Applepound, and was rewarded with a thin, crooked smile.

"Hoo boy," she muttered, turning back. "Ah-hhh, Bud? We're looking into a bit of new evidence here at the moment."

"Fine. I can still take off now and be there in less than an hour."

Sandy was wondering why she was equivocating. If Mrs. Applepound was right, and if Harris was actually working with the enemy, then Bud's presence would be welcome. Even more so if Mrs. Applepound happened to somehow be guilty.

And, if the both of them turned out to be innocent, there was still no escaping the fact that they were, quite possibly, driving towards the enemy's base. Certainly having Bud along would be helpful. Him, and whatever help he could bring along.

So what the heck was the problem?

"We're sort of north of New York City at the moment, Bud."

A rather heavy pause. Then: "How far north?"

"Right now?" Sandy peered out the window, looking for directional signs. "About . . . fifty some-odd miles."

"FIFTY MILES?"

"Thereabouts."

"What the hell are you people searching for?"

"Calm down. We're simply following the heading Tom came up with last night. Seeing if we can pick up a clue or two."

"Just you . . . a cop, and Mrs. Applepound."

"The way he says `cop`," muttered Harris.

"Detective Link just happens to be a highly trained antiterrorist agent," Sandy said, feeling an edge come into her voice. "And Mrs. Applepound is turning out not to be the total flibberigibbet we've been accusing her of being."

Squealing happily, Mrs. Applepound leaned forward to hug Sandy tightly around the neck.

"Plug your amulet back in," Bud ordered.

"I told you where we were."

"Sandra!"

"We're currently heading for a place called Black Pond," Sandy snapped. "If you're so all-fired interested in getting involved, then please feel free to meet us there." With an angry flourish she completely switched off the Snooper, jamming the device firmly back in her pocket.

"Keeps you on a short leash," Harris observed.

"Just drive!"

"Ah!" Mrs. Applepound sighed. "To be young, and in love."

"And you sit back and hush."

* * * * *

Some time later they turned right off the Taconic State Parkway to travel for several miles on Peekskill Hollow Road, which eventually turned into the Carmel-Kent Cliffs Road, and then became the Miller Hill Road. Each change resulting in a narrowing of available driving surface.

"The last time I saw a road like this," Harris said, "was in a Japanese horror film. The idiot paranormal researcher stops in the middle of the creepy woods, actually gets out of the car and decides to go deep among the trees."

"Oh, I saw that one," Mrs. Applepound replied breathlessly. "He follows these bizarre sounds, then comes back to his car to find---"

"People," Sandy admonished.

Harris carefully turned left, bringing the car onto a narrow tree-bordered strip, past a small sign which was marked BLACK POND ROAD.

"There was blood everywhere," he said.

"Harris!"

They continued driving in silence for almost a mile, before the road made a sharp bend, and Harris immediately slammed on the brake. "Whoa!"

Directly in their path was a corrugated steel gate. It was part of an old, chain-link fence which stretched out in two directions. Beyond the gate was a clearing which included what was plainly one end of a runway.

On the gate was a sign. BLACK POND AIRFIELD/AAFIT TESTING CENTER. GOVERNMENT PROPERTY. NO TRESPASSING.

"At the risk of sounding clichéd, this must be the place," Harris said.

Sandy let out a breath. "Well! As long as we've come all this way, we might as well have a look around."

Switching off the motor, Harris moved out of the car, Sandy following suit on her side, with Mrs. Applepound emerging from the rear. "Oooh! My legs could do with a stretch."

Sandy could taste rain in the cloudy air as she quietly stepped closer to the gate, peering beyond. "That field doesn't look too overgrown," she murmured.

"And I don't know about you," Harris added, "but this sign looks fairly new. Sort of sounds odd for a supposedly abandoned airfield." Spotting something, he moved closer to the gate. "And a brand-new lock as well."

"Sandy!"

"Mrs. A?"

The author motioned for her to come closer, and Sandy moved to the rear of the car. Mrs. Applepound was staring down at the ground. "Do you remember how the hideout of the bad guys was located in Tom Swift And The Postal Clerk With The Sodium Brain?"

"Gosh, Mrs. A, I'm sort of sorry to admit that I don't."

Mrs. Applepound pointed down at the ground. "These fresh tracks in the dirt. Much deeper and wider than anything our car would've made."

Sandy noticed that the road did indeed show evidence of heavy vehicles having recently moved.

Mrs. Applepound was frowning closer at the tracks. "I would say we're definitely on the track of our dastardly opponents."

"Oh I have every faith in your conclusion, Mrs. A."

"I'm pleased to bask in your confidence, Sandra."

"Well. It just so happens to be based on more than your observation."

"Oh?"

"Yes. For one thing, Harris is slowly raising his hands into the air."

Mrs. Applepound quickly straightened up, looking around. "Oh dear!"

"Yes. I'm afraid the other thing are indeed the four gentlemen currently pointing the machine guns at us."

Chapter Twenty-Two: Tornadoville.

The gunmen didn't say anything, but Sandy was of the opinion that the Heckler & Koch MP7s they carried were eloquent enough. That and their considerably less than pleasant expressions.

"I don't suppose a casual walk back to our car, followed by backing away a bit, then turning around and driving off, would improve the situation any," Sandy murmured to Harris, her eyes still on their captors.

Harris was staring at the four unwavering gun barrels.

"I'm guessing we've sort of passed beyond that stage," he murmured back.

The furthest of the guards now unhooked a small radio from his belt and, his eyes still on his captives, spoke a few quiet words. He then resumed watching.

"Oh, and Sandy?" Harris leaned a little closer. "Your theory on this maybe being the attackers' hideout?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm inclined to say 'good call' on that one."

Sandy wasn't in a mood to argue. "You doing okay, Mrs. A?"

"I keep reminding myself that I've survived the last eight Comic Cons," Mrs. Applepound replied, her eyes as wide as saucers. "This should be a walk in the park."

A jeep quickly approached from the direction of the airfield, coming to a halt near the gate. From it emerged two men who moved to unlock the steel gate, then pulled it open. The gunmen then motioned for Sandy, Harris and Mrs. Applepound to step over to the jeep and climb in.

Okay, thought Sandy, this is it. This is the point where I make some sort of heroic, martial-art move and save the day. Or Harris does something and gives me a chance. Or even Mrs. Applepound turns out to be the real villain. Something. Anything.

But the gunmen took up careful positions, covering the threesome as they squeezed into the back of the jeep. One of the gunmen then sat alongside the driver, his weapon pointed directly at Sandy, while another gunman positioned himself on a small step behind the jeep, bracing himself against a metal frame which allowed him to keep his gun pointed at the back of Harris' head. Meanwhile, the steel gate was being closed, with the remaining guards also moving towards the car.

And we haven't been searched, Sandy wildly reasoned to herself. My amulet's still disconnected. But I could still reach my Snooper . . .

But the mouth of a machine gun was only inches away from her face, and Sandy decided to keep any sudden moves to a bare minimum. Such as none whatsoever.

The jeep had turned and was heading quickly towards the other end of the airfield. To the right, the trees suddenly disappeared and, across the landing strip, Sandy could now see the dark waters of the large pond which gave the area its name.

Her attention was then drawn to a collection of buildings which appeared to the left. It was a striking combination of the old and the new. A large, dilapidated hangar dominated the area. Several enormous slug-like cylinders nestled close against one side of the building.

Harris had also seen them. "Flexible storage tanks," he said. "Possibly delivered by aircraft and locally filled."

Sandy nodded. She noticed how some of the cylinders seemed to be covered in a layer of frost.

"I'm willing to bet those cargo aircraft waiting down in New York dropped them off here, along with the tornado planes, before making their final landing," she said, her eyes studying the setup. "Somebody did their homework when they picked this place."

"This whole operation smacks of advanced intelligence," Harris agreed.

The jeep turned, heading onto a side road which would take it behind the hangar. As they passed the large building, Mrs. Applepound gasped, and Harris nudged Sandy. "Hey!"

But Sandy was also looking into the large open door to the hangar. She could clearly see the unusual vehicles parked inside, being serviced; their designs heavily based on the Focke-Wulf Fw Triebflügel, as well as the Heinkel Lerche. The tornado generating planes which had attacked Enterprises, and elsewhere.

The jeep continued on, making a turn to finally come to a stop next to a building which was practically as large and as old as the hangar which it nestled against. Sandy noticed a cluster of enormous pipes and ducts which, to her experienced eye, indicated the location of what had originally been the wind tunnel facility which the airfield had made use of. Rather than looking old, however, the machinery glistened with the shine of recent refurbishment.

Several more large, flexible storage tanks were cuddled tightly between the building and the hangar. Nearby, a small farm of portable satellite antennae pointed upwards. From somewhere near, Sandy could clearly hear the sound of a generator.

The gunmen who had ridden in the jeep were now joined by five more who quickly moved out of the building. In complete silence, using the guns to indicate what they wanted, the guards directed Sandy and the others to climb out of the jeep and enter the building.

"Talkative souls," Sandy muttered.

"I don't think English is necessarily their mother tongue," Harris remarked, his eyes moving from one guard to the next.

"I taught myself some Brungarian and Kranjovian phrases when I started writing about you and your brother," Mrs. Applepound offered timidly. "However, I don't think you want me making remarks such as `Die, Swift scum!'"

"Ummmm . . . very probably not, Mrs. A."

Immediately inside the building, in what appeared to be a sparsely furnished lobby, the guards immediately assumed careful covering positions on all sides. Meanwhile, two unarmed men, moving as rapidly as possible, approached the trio, searching all over. Sandy's amulet was immediately taken, as was her Snooper.

Harris was deprived of his gun, and Sandy couldn't help but notice that the detective had been tensing himself, as if preparing to make some sort of move. But one of the gunmen raised his weapon directly into firing position, and Harris slowly relaxed.

Having been searched, the three were escorted down a narrow hallway, then shoved through an open door into a bare, windowless room. Behind them, the door was firmly closed, and the sound of a lock was unmistakable.

Sandy now allowed her arms to fall, enjoying the release of the strain which her muscles had been in. "Well," she said half to herself, looking around. "Well!"

Harris was also looking around, moving close to the door and bending down to examine the lock. "I keep telling myself that, if they wanted to kill us, they would've done so already."

From your lips to God's ears, Sandy quietly answered.

"They took your Snooper," Mrs. Applepound murmured to her. "I take it . . ."

Sandy shook her head. "Didn't get a chance to switch on the homing device. And, naturally, I was stupid and didn't plug my amulet back in." Sighing, she worked to shake the angry thoughts out of her head, not succeeding too well. "And that reminds me of something, Mrs. A. I feel we owe Harris an apology."

"Oh?"

Harris turned to frown quizzically at the women.

Sandy nodded, suddenly feeling tired. "If it had been Harris who had summoned the plane attack on the Sky Room, then that plane would logically have to had been on station nearby for quite a while." She slowly shook her head. "Even with stealth capability, I can't see how it could've done that and remained unseen for so long, as well as airborne. No. It definitely had to be the amulet the attackers homed in on."

Harris slowly straightened up. "You mean to tell me you suspected---"

"I'm sorry," Sandy declared. "Really, Harris. I am. If there's been one constant throughout this entire stupid business, it's been me being hit on all sides with evidence that's caused me to incorrectly suspect all sorts of people. You, Herr Nospe, Section Omphalos . . ."

"Sandy!"

But Sandra's eyes widened as a thought crept in out of nowhere.

"One constant," she whispered. She slowly looked around at the room, as if seeing it for the first time. "Advanced intelligence."

Suddenly the door was unlocked, then thrown open, and three gunmen began entering. As Sandy watched, Harris suddenly moved into action, launching himself at the guards.

"No!"

But, as fast as Harris was, one of the guards still managed to quickly sidestep him, bringing the stock of his gun down hard upon the detective's head. With a groan, Harris folded to the floor.

Sandy rushed to him, but suddenly froze as she found herself facing all three guns. Without a word, the guards stepped back out into the hall, and motioned for her to follow.

Mrs. Applepound's face was as white as chalk. "Oh Lord . . ."

Sandy forced herself to remain calm and still. Slowly, making certain her movements were careful, she began approaching the guards, her eyes never leaving their faces. "Mrs. A?"

"Sandy?"

"Please watch over Harris."

"I-I'll try, lovie."

Outside, Sandy found herself flanked by two of the guards, with the third taking up position several feet behind. She was then led further down the corridor, again receiving no word or instruction from her escort other than a directing nudge.

A small part of her felt that, with her own martial arts training, she could've possibly have taken out the two men on either side. But she coldly reasoned that the gunman behind her would cut her down the moment she made such a move. She concentrated on cooperating, trying hard not to think of her final sight of Harris' injured body.

She realized she was being led deeper into the building, eventually leaving behind the utilitarian walls of the outer area to pass among the curving metal surfaces which doubtless made up part of the wind tunnel facility. The sound of the generator was becoming more pronounced, and she could also feel a gentle throbbing beneath her feet.

Then a door was opened, and Sandy was brought into what was clearly some sort of office. Several wooden chairs and some filing boxes had been set up around an old, simple desk. Beyond the desk was another door.

With rapid efficiency, Sandy was firmly pushed down onto a chair that faced the desk, with the open door to the office at her back. Thin, durable plastic binders were produced and, within moments, she was tightly secured to the chair. Then, much to her surprise, the guards backed away out of sight, leaving her alone in the room.

Part of her had actually expected the sudden impact of bullets. But, if Harris (Harris!) had been correct, they were all being kept alive for a reason.

So far.

Feeling she was alone for the moment, Sandy immediately began experimenting with her imprisonment. But the bindings were effectively holding her to the chair, with no way of breaking them. She was able to rock the chair back and forth, but realized that trying to escape while tied to it would've been worse than useless.

Damnation!

Since escape wasn't possible, the next objective was information, and Sandy began looking around, carefully studying her surroundings. The desk was free of clutter, and the filing boxes were maddeningly unmarked.

But the room carried one unusual feature. Off to one side, against the wall to her right, rested a modern piece of electronic equipment. Sandy frowned at it for several moments before she could make out just enough of the markings to realize she was staring at a portable electroencephalograph machine.

A torture device of some sort? Were her captors going to somehow make use of an EEG machine against her?

Next to the device was a metal wastepaper can overflowing with scraps. Some of them, in fact, rested on the floor near her, and Sandy leaned over to stare down at them. She quickly realized she was looking at hard copy EEG readouts from the machine.

Due to circumstances involving her Ecuador mission, Sandy had been given what she felt was more than her fair share of EEG examinations. As such, she carried a working familiarity with interpreting clinical findings. Gazing down at the readout strip, she easily recognized unusual activity in both the Theta and Gamma waves of whoever had been examined.

In fact, the more she studied, the more she realized she had seen such readings before. "Oh no!"

She then noticed a series of handwritten marks alongside the edge of the readout. Her pulse quickened as her eyes widened. "Oh . . . No!"

It was then she heard voices approaching from behind. Two people talking. Male. And, as Sandy listened closely, one of the voices pulled out a memory which fell like a lead weight into her head.

Shaking her head slowly, she let out a long sigh. Of course!

She then raised her voice. "Come in, Mister Geiner."

Chapter Twenty-Three: Supersonic Death Trap.

A few moments passed, then a figure stepped into Sandy's view and she looked up.

Duran Geiner. The last time Sandy had seen him had been during her visit to Ecuador. There, he had supposedly been working for German domestic intelligence, investigating the activities which Nospe's company, Wintergruppe, had been involved in. In reality, however, Geiner had turned out to be a double-agent: employed by several of Wintergruppe's rivals in an attempt to gain information concerning the Swift's relationships with the Space Friends. He had manipulated Sandy into unknowingly assisting his schemes.

Since then it had been almost a year, but Geiner had changed somewhat. The physique he once enjoyed as an intelligence agent had lost its edge, and he now seemed a bit rumped. But his eyes were still sharp, and they possessed a rather noticeable glitter as he now smiled down at Sandy. "You remember me," he said. "I'm touched."

"I won't debate it," Sandy replied calmly. "And I always tend to remember men who ended up having to be peeled off of a hospital wall in Ecuador before being hauled back to Germany for arrest, trial and a supposedly lengthy stay in some federally funded Home for the Terminally Naughty. Which brings up the next question: why am I seeing you here? Now?"

Geiner's smile widened as he moved back to sit upon the edge of the desk. "For people of my . . . singular talents---"

"Human cockroach."

"---there is always work to be done. And sticks and stones, Sandra. Frankly, I was hoping Miss Winkler would be accompanying you. At least then I'd have a source for witty comebacks.

"But as to my presence. For the moment let us say I've recently acquired some new employers. They had a need which necessitated my being released from incarceration, as well as implementing a particular plan of theirs."

"Herr Nospe never mentioned you breaking out of jail."

"As far as Nospe knows, I'm still in Brandenburg-Görden. My employers possess some rather impressive talents and resources."

"Not to mention a penchant for collecting insects."

Geiner briefly looked down at the floor, sighing a bit. "Sandra . . . if it's your intention to make me angry, then believe me when I say I'm perfectly willing to accommodate you. Truly. I had a bad sinus headache when I woke up this morning, but the events of the past half-hour might make this a red-letter day all around."

"Happy to oblige."

The smile returned to Geiner's face. "And now we finally come to it. You. Me. The whole nine yards of explanation regarding what's going on."

"Let me guess," Sandy said wearily. "You're involved with a right-wing, Nazi-revival group that's using updated weapons in a strike against former enemies of the Reich."

"No."

"No?" Sandy frowned and thought for a moment. "Was I even close?"

"Hardly," Geiner replied, rocking back and forth slightly upon the desk.

"Well . . . certainly all of this can't simply be about revenge against me for what happened back in Ecuador? I mean, you're not doing this just to capture, horribly torture and then eventually kill me?"

Geiner stopped rocking. "Please. Meat and vegetables first. Then dessert."

Open your big mouth a little wider, Sandy silently admonished herself. "C'mon, Geiner. If all you wanted to do was kill me, you've certainly had plenty of opportunities to do so while you were out of prison. Lord knows I probably could've been squarely in your sights a lot of times before now."

"You're making my mouth water," Geiner replied. "And you're correct. There've been numerous moments when I could've easily killed you. That moment back at Enterprises, for instance."

Sandy's eyes slowly widened. "That was you who was flying the tornado plane that landed. You were the one with the pistol."

Geiner smiled, nodding. "And, admittedly, it took quite a bit of self-control to keep from putting a bullet through your head. But this whole . . . enterprise . . . had been so much fun that I wanted to play with you a bit more." His eyes hardened slightly. "Just a little bit more."

Sandy definitely didn't like the feeling currently moving through her. Yes, folks, welcome to Unpleasantness City. Population: me.

"I admit to being curious, though," Geiner said. "You knew it was me before I stepped into the office. I have to ask, what was it that gave me away?"

Keep him talking, Sandy ordered herself. Keep him interested. "In the first place, I employed a little process of elimination---"

"What a coincidence. I'm planning on doing the same thing."

Sandy continued over the conversational speed bump. "Admittedly I've managed to make some enemies. Especially recently. And I imagine Herr Nospe has several people who'd like to see him come to a bad end. But someone who'd want to hurt the both of us?" Sandy shook her head. "Not too many names on that list."

Geiner seemed to accept the theory.

"Second, while in Ecuador, I kept finding myself being maneuvered into mistrusting this or that person. The same thing was happening here." Sandy shook her head again. "You're becoming predictable, Geiner."

"Nothing wrong with being predictable when it works, Sandra. Let's take you, for instance. I laid out clue after clue. I made everything so blessed easy for you to follow. I arranged for near misses, such as the sniper in Ohio, and the missile attack---"

"Ach . . . near misses?"

"I planned and organized this incredibly convenient trap for you, and what happens? You up and simply walk into it." Geiner glared at her. "Still the stupid little girl, playing at adventuring."

"So stupid that I thoroughly managed to trip your sorry self up in Ecuador---"

Geiner suddenly moved off the desk. His arm swung, his hand catching Sandy hard across the face. The pain was horrendous enough, but Geiner's hand was also carrying a ring which managed to leave a vicious cut across her lip.

It took several long moments for the stars to clear in Sandy's head. Then, trying to ignore the taste of blood, she fought to look back up at Geiner. "So what is it?" she breathed. "We were discussing your great scheme, Geiner. Or, rather, you're doing all the discussing, and I'm your captive audience."

He loomed over her, still breathing hard. But he was also struggling to calm himself, and his eyes adopted a slightly thoughtful cast. "Perhaps my explanation would help if it was accompanied by some concrete visual elements." Nodding once over Sandy's head he stepped back, waiting. Sandy then felt someone moving close behind her, followed by her bindings being loosened and removed.

"Bringen Sie sie mit," he ordered sharply, brusquely moving past Sandy and on out of the office.

Sandy was still trying to restore circulation to her wrists when she felt a hand pulling her out of the chair. The same hand then turned her about and she once again found herself facing armed guards. Five of them.

The three who were waiting outside the office motioned with their guns, and Sandy wearily walked out and turned right, finding herself close behind Geiner who had started moving on down the corridor.

The exposed back of his neck made Sandy's fingers tingle, and she reminded herself that the gunmen behind her were in a position to make a pretty mess if they were so inclined.

Would they risk shooting through me and hitting Geiner? she wildly thought.

She prudently decided that now was not the time to test the employee loyalty quotient of Geiner's people.

Besides, Geiner was speaking. "In our last encounter, my mission was to try and break Wintergruppe's monopoly on working to acquire the space secrets your father and your brother possess. My current employers have a variety of goals, but among them is a more direct effort towards acquisition of those secrets."

Sandy groaned. "Has everyone in Europe been dropped on their heads? Geiner . . . there is no monopoly! My father and Tom have shared everything they've learned. There's a complete international exchange of data. European scientific interests have a firm presence on Nestria, and full access to anything found there."

"My employers feel differently."

"Your employers are full of garbanzo beans."

Geiner stopped and halfway turned in her direction. "And yet they're ingenious enough to have supplied me with the means by which I've been able to crack Enterprises wide open. Directly. Observe." With a wave of his hand he now indicated a narrow circular hatchway in the metal wall. A thick door hung to one side.

"Please, Sandra."

Cautiously, Sandy moved past Geiner and stepped through the hatchway.

She found herself standing in a horizontal metal cylinder twice her height. To her left the cylinder stretched on for about fifteen feet before sharply narrowing to surround a thick metallic grille. Beyond it was darkness.

Ten feet away to her right the cylinder narrowed down around the far end of a machine which was firmly anchored in place. Sandy stared at the machine. It seemed rather familiar . . .

"That almost looks like one of our turbofan jet engines," Sandy said. "I think."

Geiner, flanked by two of the guards, had entered the chamber behind Sandy, and he now applauded softly. "Very good, Test Pilot. And quite right. That machine indeed started out as one of your jet engines. But it has undergone some rather severe modifications courtesy of the experts which I and my employers have brought together. Do you understand our location?"

Sandy continued looking around. Directly above the hatchway, and on a level with the modified engine, she could see a narrow viewing port.

"I'm guessing this is your wind tunnel."

"Correct again. This was part of the original airfield's wind tunnel facility. As with the engine, it has also seen numerous changes. This is, in point of fact, the test bed for our tornado generating system. Our Cyclone Gun."

Sandy slowly faced Geiner, crossing her arms. "I'm listening."

"Do you understand how tornados are created, Sandra?"

"Um! All things considered, I guess I should know more than I do."

Geiner raised an eyebrow. "A test pilot, and you're not familiar with potentially harmful weather conditions? A Swift, and you know nothing about masses of air?"

The sound of Sandy's knuckles cracking was louder in the chamber. "Right," she said. "Okay. As I understand it, tornados are rotating columns of air. Under certain circumstances, changes in wind speed and direction can bring about organized rotation patterns, or mesocyclones, which form at high altitude in some thunderstorms. If something like rain is introduced into the mix, a mesocyclone can be dragged down to the ground. You get a visible condensation funnel in the rear flank downdraft or, for want of a better term, a tornado."

Geiner considered it. "Extraordinarily oversimplified but, for our purposes, acceptable. Myself, I am no meteorologist, but I've had quite a bit of opportunity to study the subject over the past few months."

He nodded over at the anchored engine. "Notice the rod-like assemblies evenly fitted around the nozzle. Those are computer-controlled masers of an advanced design. In essence, they improve over the original concepts which the Nazis employed. The masers are used to selectively apply heat wherever needed. Meanwhile, the rotors in the engine are designed to produce a focused and controllable area of turbulence. If necessary, the engine can also project either a compressed stream of a custom-mixed refrigerant, or additional heat through modified jet thrust.

"Using onboard computers, my aircraft study the conditions of air in a particular area. Then, by employing a rapid-fire juggling of extreme temperature zones, the heavier, colder air is quickly and centripetally expelled, leaving a low-pressure cylinder of hot air. By using the both the masers and the aircraft rotors, the heated air is then pushed into what is called the `vortex arena`. A selective vectoring of both the engines and the aircraft rotors focuses the rotation, and tornados are formed." Geiner noticed the look on Sandy's face. "Another oversimplification, I admit. But my employers supplied the core technology and, so far, it's worked to perfection. Any one of my aircraft can produce a tornado capable of causing severe damage. When flown in formation . . . such as what happened at Enterprises . . . they can generate a storm far in excess of EF5 on the

Enhanced Fujita Scale. A storm powerful enough to produce an airstream capable of tearing through solid metal."

Sandy's frown deepened. "And you used it to loot warehouses throughout Europe."

"My employers have their limitations, Sandra. One of them has been in the area of supplying major components on a regular basis. In order to upgrade the Cyclone Gun, we've been obliged to make selective raids here and there."

"Uh-huh. And the nanotech you stole from Enterprises?"

Geiner almost looked boyish. "Oh, that was simply my jerking your family's chain. At least in the beginning. To be honest about it, I had no idea what it was I had stolen. But, once I figured it out, I decided to hold onto it as a sort of windfall. Imagine if you will, Sandra, a fleet of Cyclone Guns made practically indestructible due to your brother's technology."

"I'm trying not to," Sandy muttered.

"But you've seen the effect they've been able to produce in their present state. That effect can be repeated again and again. And it will be. Swift Enterprises will eventually be . . . but allow me to offer a more direct demonstration."

His eyes still on Sandy, Geiner carefully backed out of the cylinder and into the corridor. The two guards kept their guns trained on Sandy as they followed Geiner, leaving Sandy behind. Then the thick hatch was swung into place and tightly closed.

Moments passed, then Geiner appeared on the other side of the viewing port.

His voice appeared from an unseen speaker. "From this room I can control the operation of the wind tunnel." A pause, and then Sandy dimly heard the sound of the generator increasing in volume. "I've now triggered the process of charging the high pressure storage tank. Soon I'll switch on the engine."

Sandy looked about, then back up at Geiner. "I think I've got a pretty good idea of the process involved, Geiner. Thank you."

"Understanding is only a small part of it, Sandra," Geiner calmly said. "To fully appreciate the ability of the Cyclone Gun, one must truly experience its full capabilities. Directly." He made a hidden gesture with a hand. "There. The settings for the pressure control and spreader have been locked in. It's now only a matter of building up a sufficient charge."

His eyes now looked up through the window, staring directly at Sandy. "The Cyclone Gun has had other uses besides testing out the systems I employ in my aircraft. You're certainly not the first . . . irritant . . . that's crossed my path since I've established

this facility. Several other people have stood more or less where you're standing right now."

He made a brief nod to his left, and Sandy's eyes followed to the far end of the wind tunnel. She now noticed the pale crimson marks on the metallic grille. They almost resembled paint . . .

"If I had time, Sandra, I could bring a projection screen up here and show you the recordings I made of such tests," Geiner said. His voice became soft. "But I'm afraid setting everything up would take more than five minutes. Not quite enough time."

Chapter Twenty-Four: "For They Have Sown The Wind . . ."

Less than five minutes!

Sandy's immediate instinct was to turn towards the door to the chamber. She just as quickly dropped the idea. The door would've done justice to a bank vault.

Leap at the display window and claw her way through to Geiner? Possibly satisfying on a strictly emotional level, but otherwise impractical.

All around her she could hear the slowly rising sound of the wind tunnel mechanism preparing itself. The modified jet engine facing her, preparing to fill the narrow space of the tunnel with lethal winds.

Glancing behind her, Sandy studied the metallic grille. No good. The grille was thick, firmly in place, and the only way to pass through its openings was to assume the consistency of toothpaste. The problem was that, very soon now, such an idea wouldn't be too far beyond the realm of possibility. Unfortunately.

Which only left the engine itself, and Sandy went for a closer look. Yes. Definitely a Swift Enterprises engine. To be precise: a SE-410B afterburning turbofan. Sandy quickly ran the specifications through her mind: twin-spool augmented turbofan . . . 3,560 pounds . . . annular combustor . . . three-stage low pressure, eight-stage high pressure axial flow compressor . . . thrust to weight ratio 9:1 . . .

None of which was going to get her out of trouble. And the sound of the mechanism was still steadily growing. Only a few minutes . . .

The nozzle of the engine was just above her forehead, the opening wide enough to allow the compressed winds of the cyclone to turn her body into ground beef when released.

Sandy felt her nails digging hard into her palms. Felt hot tears starting to fill her eyes. She didn't want to look in Geiner's direction. Didn't want to give him any sort of satisfaction.

There had to be a way.

If she only had some acid, or a laser, or some explosives. Even her Snooper would've been useful somehow.

On impulse she jumped up to grab the engine, pulling herself upwards. It had entered her mind that she could somehow crawl directly into the nozzle. But that path was blocked by the razor-sharp blades of the compressor which, even now, were slowly starting to spin in preparation for producing the cyclone.

A sudden snap made her jump, but she realized it was only the ring of masers being fed power. Running out of time . . .

Peeking up past the nozzle, she stared down the inner length of the engine. Saw everything practically halfway up through the assembly. Including the maintenance access ports . . .

And Sandy caught her breath. There. Six feet ahead of her. She could just barely see it. The long, thin, curved metal bar which held the nozzle in place. Normally it assisted in the positioning of the nozzle for thrust vectoring. To service the thrust vectoring system itself, the bar had to be positioned firmly forward, unlocking the nozzle.

Shoving her arm in, Sandy stretched as far as she could, trying to reach for the bar. Pushing as much of herself as possible into the narrow space. But, as hard as she struggled, the bar remained another three feet out of reach.

Sandy felt obscenities leaking out of her mouth. She was in a desperate situation. A life-threatening one. In such situations a person was supposed to be able to do the impossible. But her body would not fit any further into the tight space between the nozzle and the engine fairing. And her arm refused to grow any longer.

"What are you doing, Sandy?" Geiner asked.

Almost in a mood to cry, Sandy slid down off the engine. Stood there facing the jet nozzle which, very soon now, would kill her. She was going to die. She'd failed herself, Mrs. Applepound, Harris, Bud, Tom . . .

Everyone!

She was going to die. Angrily she slapped her arms down hard against her sides.

And suddenly froze. Oh!

Quickly her hand slipped into the pocket, confirming that the small, hard object was indeed there and not just a figment of her desperate imagination. Roughly the size and weight of a ball bearing, and she now remembered that she had absently placed it back into her pocket that morning when she dressed, intending to eventually return it to its rightful location.

The battery from her security amulet.

They'd taken the amulet, and her Snooper. But she'd kept the battery with her.

Think, think, think . . .

Sandy bit her lip, staring up at the lethal engine. The sound of its powering-up now almost making it difficult to concentrate within the chamber. What to do with just a battery? Just a battery? Just a small, hard, solid battery . . .

And something else!

Sandy stared back up at the engine, her mind whirling. "Geiner? I'm going to make two wild guesses about the other people you had in here."

No answer from the observation gallery.

"First . . . they weren't aeronautical engineers."

Quickly, Sandy reached behind her, her fingers moving up inside her blouse. Finding the fastenings to her bra. "And second . . . they weren't women."

Unsnapping the bra she hurriedly shifted about, pulling and tugging until she had managed to remove the particular item of clothing from beneath the blouse. Then she jumped back up onto the engine, once again pulling herself up to where she could see deep within the fairing.

The sounds around her were growing into a howling. Sandy reasoned she had less than a minute. Maybe even less than thirty seconds.

She rapidly began wrapping the bra securely about her hands, fashioning a crude slingshot (and mentally blessing her mother for supplying the necessary genes which was making such an attempt possible). Fitting the battery into one of the elastic straps, she positioned herself firmly upon her perch, then pulled back on the strap, aiming as carefully as she could.

Only one shot . . .

Sandy fired, and almost shrieked with joy as the battery firmly struck the locking bar, knocking it forward. Suddenly the nozzle of the jet engine automatically narrowed, assuming the standard configuration for maintenance. At the same time, Sandy could feel the entire rear section of the engine now moving loose as the thrust vectoring hinges disengaged from their fixed position. By shifting her body she could now move the nozzle in any direction.

Time it . . . Time it . . .

She looked now towards the observation gallery. Saw the growing surprise on Geiner's face as she swung the nozzle hard to her right while, at the same time, throwing herself off. Flattening herself against the chamber floor she slapped her hands hard against her ears, firmly closing her eyes.

She thought she might have heard a distant cry of something vaguely Teutonic and quite nasty. But the feeling was quickly replaced by the sound of what seemed to be an eight hundred thousand ton freight train passing just inches away from the back of her head. A brief pulse of heat, the shaking of the floor beneath her, a sharp burst of wind which scraped hard along her back . . .

And then silence. Or at least in the immediate area. From somewhere far away, Sandy could hear what seemed to be distant explosions.

Carefully raising her head, Sandy looked up towards the observation gallery. Or rather, what was left of it. Exposure to a focused cyclone, backed by some thirty-five thousand pounds of thrust delivered in a single burst, had left a large smoking hole in what was once the viewing window.

There was no sign of Geiner or anyone else. With as much caution as she could manage . . . and her head still ringing . . . Sandy moved herself to a standing position. Feeling the heat radiating from the now quiet engine, she wisely decided against using the nozzle for support and, instead, took several steps back before running across the chamber and jumping. Her fingers managed to grab the lowest edge of the hole in the window (the still smoldering material causing her to yelp out in pain), and Sandy quickly chinned up, working to pull herself into the room beyond.

She found herself in the control room for the wind tunnel. Or, again, what was left of it. The blast from the engine had not only punched a hole through the gallery window, but had thoroughly ruined the control console beneath it, as well as scorching the instrument panels located to either side.

There was a door at the other side of the room. It was now a study in smoldering fragments dominated by a hole only slightly larger than the one which had passed through the gallery window.

Of Geiner there was no sign. But Sandy could clearly hear emergency sirens wailing in the distance. And the floor beneath her feet rocked as something exploded somewhere in the general area. The air was thick with the smells of smoke and chemicals.

OK, Sandy thought. All I wanted was a way out of the wind tunnel. But this is good.

Reaching the door, she found herself at the top of a ladder leading into the corridor she'd been in earlier. Climbing down she found that the smoke was thicker, and Sandy could now see that the walls on the far side seemed . . . blasted.

Recalling that the corridor was placed tight against the wind tunnel assembly, Sandy realized that the tornado she had launched had not only broken through the wind tunnel control room, but had gone on beyond. The tornado had probably ruptured not only the high pressure tank used in operating the tunnel, but also the adjoining pressurized tanks which had held whatever fluids, gases or chemicals Geiner and his people used to develop and maintain their fleet of cyclone planes.

"Oops," muttered Sandy.

Still no sign of Geiner, but a guard was quietly lying face down on the floor near the torn edge of the far wall. Bending down (and trying very hard not to think of the condition the guard was in), Sandy snatched up the Heckler & Koch MP7, straightening back up as she checked the clip, making certain it was full.

She knew her father wouldn't approve. And Tom would probably frown as well.

But I am so tired of all this, Sandy told herself.

The gun was a comforting weight in her hands as she moved her way through the shifting smoke, trying to catch her breath and locate the room where Harris and Mrs. Applepound had been left behind. Still no sign of anyone, but the sirens were louder.

Finally reaching the room she found it empty. No guards. No Geiner . . . no one, and Sandy had a bad feeling that both Harris and Mrs. Applepound had been taken to be used as "insurance".

"Never liked insurance," Sandy muttered as her mind kept asking where the heck everyone was.

Reaching the door leading outside, Sandy paused, allowing the barrel of the gun to precede her slightly. No response and, swallowing firmly, Sandy ducked down, rolling to the opposite side of the doorway into a position where she could cover a wide area of view.

Still nothing, and Sandy slowly straightened up, only to instinctively duck once more as the howl of a jet engine reached her ears. Her eyes spotted movement and she stepped out of the building just in time to see a sleek object race skywards.

One of the Heinkel Lerches. Taking off and beginning a gradual arc westward. As it moved out of sight, Sandy stepped further out into the open, noticing that the jeep was missing. She then noticed that the air around her was filled with flames and smoke. Apparently the tornado she'd launched had indeed passed through quite a bit . . . including the flexible fuel storage tanks which had been resting between the hangar and the wind tunnel assembly.

"That's some battery," she murmured.

A movement made her snap the gun up into position. But she almost dropped it as she saw it was Mrs. Applepound busily dragging the limp form of Harris Link out into an open part of the nearby tarmac, further away from the clouds of smoke.

"Oh!"

Sandy rushed over, trying to swallow her heart back into her chest. "Mrs. A!"

The woman looked up, her face stricken and streaked with tears. "Oh, Sandra!" Sniffing and gulping, she carefully laid Harris down fully on the tarmac. "He's breathing, but I fear he's suffering from a very serious blow to the head. I can't get him to wake up and, oh my God, I'm at my wits end!"

Sandy dropped next to Harris, putting the gun aside and allowing her fingers to gently probe.

"There was this sudden explosion," Mrs. Applepound was hurriedly explaining. "The whole building shook and I sort of just hid down in the corner. There was running and shouting, in German I think, and then there was nothing but the sirens and the smoke and I finally tried to see if I could open the door a bit. No one stopped me, and there was no one anywhere and I decided to try and get Harris outside, and I know I'm babbling. I actually recognize I'm babbling for once. I don't really like it."

Sandy was letting the verbal waves wash over her as she chewed on her lower lip, trying to determine how bad Harris was. There was a pulse. But . . .

Mrs. Applepound was staring wide-eyed at the gun. "Did you kill them, Sandy?"

"I . . . don't know," Sandy said. "Honest, Mrs. A., I'm just as much in the dark about a lot of this as you are . . . HOLD IT!"

Shrieking out the last few words she brought the gun up, pointing it at a man who had been busily trying to unobtrusively scurry across the entrance to the hangar. With the gun firmly aimed, Sandy brought herself up to her feet. "Don't move."

The man had paused, staring at her, but turned as if to move. In response, Sandy fired off a few rounds, cutting a deep gouge in the tarmac only inches away from the man's feet. He froze, his hands slowly rising.

Sandy moved closer, noting that the man seemed rather old, and also rather familiar. The closer she looked, in fact, the more familiar he became.

"Mister Ronald Blue," she said. "Or, rather, Herr Roland Blau."

The man remained quite still.

"Talk to me," Sandy insisted. "Where's everybody?"

"The place exploded," Blau slowly began explaining, his eyes fixed on the unwavering barrel of the gun in Sandy's hands. "I was knocked off my feet and I came out here to try and get away. Everyone else who could move has already driven off."

"Someone flew away in one of the cyclone planes."

Blau cautiously nodded. "Geiner."

"Geiner?"

Another nod. "I happened to hear him. He seemed angry. Enraged. He was the one who gave the order for everyone to try and escape."

"Keep going," Sandy insisted. "Why'd he take off in a cyclone plane?"

"I don't know," Blau replied. "I don't," he repeated more firmly as Sandy seemed to aim more carefully. "All I know is that he was saying something about 'finally finishing it', or 'finally finishing all of it'. Or something like that."

Sandy was desperately looking around. "Damn," she muttered. "Damn, damn, damn . . ."

No sign of any jeeps or trucks around. "We need to get Detective Link to a hospital," Sandy told Blau. "Are there any cars or anything else around here? Do you know if there's any First Aid kits?"

Blau tried to shrug while remaining still. "Everything with wheels got taken. I was going to see if there was a car left at the gate."

Sandy thought of the Buick they'd arrived in. Back at the gate, at the far end of the field. Surely that would've been taken as well. But it was all Hobson's Choice, and she wondered how fast she could run . . .

A rush of engines from above, and Sandy ducked, looking up. But it was an atomicar slowing above them, its wheels extending as it began descending towards a landing near Mrs. Applepound and Harris.

Sandy soon saw who was at the controls, and angels sang within her heart. "Oh God!" she cried, breaking into a run.

Bud was already climbing out of the cockpit, looking around. "Wow, you can sure tell where you've been . . . Hey!"

It took him a few moments to respond with his own embrace, and Sandy could only imagine what he was thinking. Arriving at a catastrophic scene to find her all torn and dirty, her hands cut, burned and bleeding from crawling through the broken gallery window, holding on to a machine gun.

She struggled to keep her thoughts away from the notion of simply drowning in his arms. "Bud . . . you got to . . . Wait! My amulet's still disconnected. How did you find us?"

"You told me where you'd be," Bud said. "A couple of hours back you told me you were heading here. For Black Pond." Bud's face colored slightly. "Before you switched off on me."

"Oh-hhhhh." Sandy tried to keep from fainting in relief and turned to nod at the others. "Bud, you've got to get Harris to a hospital. I'm pretty sure he's suffering from a head trauma. You can fly him and Mrs. A. to Poughkeepsie, or Newburgh or Danbury. Even back to NYC if you move it. And you," she shrieked at Blau, leveling the gun back at him. "You head towards the car."

"You nailed Blau," Bud said.

"Yeah. And now I've got to get Geiner."

"Wait! Who's Geiner?"

But Sandy was staring towards the hangar. A great deal of it was obscured by smoke and flames, but she could see that practically all of the cyclone planes had been pushed over and were possibly damaged.

One of them, however, was sitting off to one side just outside the hangar. Sandy theorized that maybe it had been brought out for pre-flight servicing, like the Lerche which Geiner had taken.

It was one of the Triebflügels, and Sandy now began jogging towards it.

"Sandy!"

She looked back over her shoulder, pointing. "Get Harris to a hospital."

"But . . ."

"And get on the horn to Sherman and the others. Tell them Geiner's on the way."

"What?"

"A storm! Tell them a storm is coming!"

Chapter Twenty-Five: ". . . And They Shall Reap The Whirlwind."

If Sandy ever needed justification of her feelings for Bud, it came in the fact that, rather than continue arguing or asking questions, Bud only gave her a quick glance before turning and herding Mrs. Applepound, Harris and Blau on towards the atomicar, leaving Sandy free to head towards the waiting aircraft. She knew perfectly well that, if their positions had been reversed, Bud would've been in for at least an additional half-hour of dialogue.

As it was, Sandy was left alone to brood over the thought that she was currently diving headfirst into one of her less sensible decisions.

What could really go wrong? she asked herself. All I'm doing is getting ready to climb into an aircraft I have absolutely no experience with, and head off in pursuit of a murderous crazy person. I'm actually kind of getting used to doing this sort of thing.

Arriving at the aircraft in question, she slung the gun back over her shoulder, climbing one of the tail fins and grabbing for the hand and foot grips which allowed her to shimmy on up the cigar shaped body. Reaching the open cockpit, she turned and gave what she hoped was a reassuring wave to Bud before reaching for the "sissy bar" and swinging herself up into the pilot's seat.

The Triebflugel's seat was tilted forward enough so that she didn't feel as if she would end up spilled back out onto the tarmac some distance below. Which left her free to consider the controls.

In German.

Her tongue poked firmly into her cheek, Sandy regarded her situation. The last time she had flown a German aircraft, it had been when she'd taken up one of the Luftwaffe's Lockheed F-104s during an airshow some months back. The fact that it had originally been an American design had helped. Her knowledge of German was usable on technical matters. She was cleared on helicopters as well as jets . . .

Oh, well . . .

Mentally crossing her fingers, Sandy selected two switches marked BATTERIE and RESERVELEISTUNG, and was immediately rewarded with a comforting hum of power moving throughout the vehicle, as well as lights beginning to appear on the console. Even more comforting was the bubble cockpit sliding up and sealing itself into place. Further assurance that she wouldn't fall out.

Of course, she told herself, if I bothered to strap myself in . . .

Moving herself into the pilot restraints, Sandy's eyes studied the console, working out the positions of things such as the controls for the electrical systems, generator and hydraulic systems.

She was also watching information appear on a tiny screen positioned between her knees. Apparently the cyclone planes were much more automated than she had expected, and Sandy breathed a small sigh of relief as she began operating controls.

"Turn on crossfeed," she muttered. "If I can find the crossfeed . . . Ah! There! Now. Rotate APU to start. Generator one . . . on. Generator two . . . on."

The screen was blinking, asking Sandy if she needed MODUS DES NORMALEN FLUGES or WIRBELSTURMFLUGMODUS. Hedging a bet, Sandy selected the first option, noting that several of the control function labels immediately changed, as well as a few of the gauges.

"Pretty sophisticated stuff," Sandy muttered. A revelation which quietly bothered her. She tucked the thought away for the time being and continued working, finally bringing her finger down on a switch.

Almost as one, rockets fired at the end of each of the three large helicopter blades which extended from the waist of the aircraft. Slowly at first, then with increasing speed, the blades began spinning. Soon the ramjet pods attached to the rockets fired into life and, within seconds, the blades were a glistening blur.

Sandy rested her hands on both the collective and cyclic control sticks.

"OK kids," she whispered, "let's try something here."

Moving the sticks she adjusted the pitch of the rotors, and the aircraft quickly rose skywards.

"Woo!" Sandy remarked. "That was smooth."

She prudently waited until she felt she had gained sufficient altitude before attempting to switch to horizontal flight. Experimenting slightly with the feel of the machine, Sandy worked the controls until she had managed to make a careful slow arc which leveled out the aircraft, allowing the rotors to now act as a giant propeller. Much to her relief, the plane responded smoothly and she was soon skimming through the air.

Part of her silently reasoned that landing would become a severe strain on her nerves.

"One miracle at a time," she muttered.

Airborne, she could now pay attention to where she was going, and it helped that small glowing navigational aids had appeared in the air before her eyes. Sandy, no stranger to heads-up displays, was none the less impressed by the quality of the presentation. "This technology is starting to scare me, Geiner," she said.

She was two hundred and sixty miles from Shopton . . . flying at a speed of six hundred and ninety miles per hour . . . placing her some twenty minutes away. And Geiner had at least a ten minute head start. It was possible he was already at Enterprises.

Looking around, Sandy noted the panel marked KOMM and dialed in the frequency for Enterprises. "Hello? Hello? Sandra Swift to Enterprises. Anyone?"

"Sandy?"

"Dad!"

"Sandy, we've just heard from Bud, and he told us you're in one of the cyclone planes. Are you the one we're currently tracking at . . . 124 degrees on approach?"

"Yes, and there's another cyclone plane somewhere between you and me. It's probably on stealth mode."

"The National Guard's already been alerted. They're putting up a screen of fighters--
_"

"You guys have got to get to safety. I think Geiner's going to attack Enterprises with the single plane, and I don't know what he's capable of doing."

"We're moving to shelters now. The National Guard can find the other plane. Sandy, you've got to land, or rendezvous with Bud---"

"If I can find Geiner, I can pass his position on to . . . WHOA!"

Years of test piloting instinct kicked in, and Sandy's hands shifted on the control sticks, sending her plane into a tight swerve just in time to avoid a sleek object which roared past. As she tried to settle her plane back on course she looked out the cockpit at the other aircraft, noting its familiar lines.

"Dad?"

"Sandy?"

A sigh. "I've just found Geiner." Sandy glanced at her instruments. "Mark my position and get the fighters here now."

"Get out of there---"

"DO IT!" Sandy yelled, slapping at the panel and cutting off further debate. Screaming at my father, she mentally continued. I just kissed my career as a test pilot goodbye, because I'm gonna be grounded for life now.

Deus volent, her mind added in a smaller voice.

But another voice suddenly appeared in the cockpit. "Dieter! Hurensöhne! Warum sind Sie das Kraftfeld nicht verwendend? Sie schießen Sie niederzuwerfen!"

Despite herself, Sandy couldn't help but smile as she touched the response key on the communications panel. "Dieter is having a bit of a lie-down back at base, Geiner."

No answer for several long moments.

Then: "Sandra! A pleasure, as always."

"Your people are injured and/or arrested," Sandy said, deciding not to add or worse. "Fighter aircraft are converging on this spot. You're all alone, Geiner."

She couldn't help but notice that Geiner's aircraft was starting to fall behind hers. Did the cyclone planes carry standard weapons? A brief inspection of her own controls indicated nothing in way of armament.

"I was intending on finishing the job of methodically peeling Enterprises apart like a grape," Geiner remarked. "But perhaps there's another job I should attend to first. Admittedly, a task I'd find much more pleasurable."

Sandy glanced out the cockpit. Seneca Lake was ahead of her, glistening off to the right. Enterprises wouldn't be too far beyond.

Where the hell were those fighters? "You won't make it to Enterprises, Geiner. Or me. Give up."

"As usual, we find ourselves at differing opinions. Allow me to demonstrate."

Geiner's plane suddenly dropped much further behind, and Sandy entered into a long, sweeping curve as she continued staring out the cockpit, keeping her eyes on the distant dot that represented Geiner's position.

As she watched, the dot suddenly seemed to darken, becoming more distinct. Then it was suddenly enveloped in what seemed to be a long, dark grey teardrop shape. An aerial worm which slithered and writhed in the clear sky.

The worm shifted and began heading in Sandy's direction. Sandy began feeling the control sticks start to struggle in her hands. Felt her aircraft begin to wobble. Even lacking full knowledge of German manufactured meteorological avionics, Sandy knew the signs well enough: she was flying into extreme weather.

Or, rather, it was flying towards her.

Moving the controls, she rapidly altered course, shifting direction away from the approaching vortex. Sandy had no notion as to how fast one of the artificially created cyclones could travel, but she wasn't in much of a mood to find out.

On the other hand, she felt it was necessary to try and get Geiner and his storm further away from Enterprises and Shopton . . . not to mention the Watkins Glen/Montour Falls area which was even now passing below her. Tilting the controls she began flying out over the waters of Seneca Lake.

And handling the plane was gradually becoming more of a chore with each passing moment. But Sandy was also feeling more and more comfortable with piloting the Triebflugel. In fact, it was beginning to feel as if the plane had actually been designed with her in mind. Which was impossible.

Unless . . .

"Talk to me, Geiner," Sandy said to the air.

"And what would you like?" his voice replied. "An obituary?"

Her mind racing, Sandy sent the plane into a shallow dive, losing altitude. Wondering if the pursuing cyclone would be able to function smoothly so close to a large body of water. "The people who hired you were able to spirit you out of a maximum

security prison without anyone the wiser for it," she said. "And yet these same people were somehow incapable of directly supplying your aircraft modification scheme. That strikes me as weird."

"And there's that saying of looking gift horses in the mouth."

Sandy began swooping low towards the Finger Lakes National Forest. "Geiner, I saw those EEG readings in your office. I saw the writing on the printout. I know that language, Geiner. I've seen it before. Don't lie to me!"

No answer, but the pursuing tornado slowly grew closer, its dark maw opening wider to reveal a storm-blackened interior.

Sandy pushed the throttle as far forward as she could. "These planes are much more than just advanced Nazi engineering," she said. "There's all sorts of tech in here that's beyond even present abilities. This plane flies so well for me, and I've never been in one before. I'm willing to bet, though, that I'm perhaps the only person outside your little group who's been properly . . . fitted . . . for handling this sort of technology."

Still no answer.

"Am I right, Geiner? Did the rest of your crew also receive" . . . Sandy almost spat the words out . . . "Special training?"

Silence for a few more moments. Then: "Don't defy us, Sandra."

Oh God! Sandy's body shook with fears she felt she had buried away long months ago. No, no, no . . .

With a wild movement, Sandy swung the controls hard over, sending her plane up into a sharp curve and turning. Behind and below her the long dark finger of the cyclone . . . which had been churning the waters of Seneca Lake, and bending over the trees of the forest . . . gradually began pointing and stretching up towards her as it followed.

And now Sandy had to swerve to avoid a near collision with four National Guard F-9s which raced past her. Twisting her head she watched as each of the planes released two air-to-air missiles, the weapons streaming long trails behind them as they arced towards the cyclone.

But she could almost hear the deep throated, express train roar of the storm as it suddenly widened, its vortex center expanding. The approaching missiles, unable to handle the cyclonic winds, were brushed aside and ripped into metallic powder.

Behind them, the attacking aircraft were swerving wildly in the teeth of the growing tempest. As Sandy watched, they attempted to maneuver out of harm's way, with only one of them succeeding. The other three jets were tossed about like toys, and Sandy felt

nauseous as she could see the pilots ejecting, their path taking them directly into the lethal storm.

"No!"

"We can still work together, Sandra," Geiner's voice spoke calmly. "There's still time."

Sandy shook her head violently. "No!" Gritting her teeth, she once again swung the plane about; at first aiming it directly into the dark twisting cloud which surrounded Geiner's vehicle.

At the last moment, when she felt the controls about to tear themselves out of her grip, she suddenly pointed her plane down towards the waters of Seneca Lake, several thousand feet below, throwing the throttle wide open.

Behind her she sensed, rather than saw, the massive storm withdraw until there was only a sleek bubble of churning air surrounding Geiner's plane. Then it too began dropping like a stone towards the lake, aiming straight at Sandy's aircraft.

Sandy watched the approaching water, feeling her plane respond rather than relying on her instruments. The controls seemed to be growing into her body . . . into her mind . . . and she felt the Triebflugel becoming more and more nimble.

Her speed was increasing. Her altitude was dropping. Both rapidly.

Very rapidly.

And Geiner was gaining. Sandy kept her eyes on the altitude reading.

"You cannot win, Sandra," Geiner said. "I've flown this sort of plane longer than you have."

Sandy's hand firmly gripped the cyclic control stick.

"You're right, Geiner," she breathed. "I'm nothing at all. Nothing but someone with years of experience as a high-performance test pilot."

At the last moment she pulled hard on the stick. "And you . . . are not!"

The scream either came from Sandy or from the airplane as the Triebflugel narrowly escaped crashing nose first into the waters of Seneca Lake; instead managing to swerve up at the last moment. Tortured to its limits, the airframe held together to arc high into the sky.

Inside the cockpit, Sandy fought to keep from blacking out due to the excessive G-forces, trying to twist her head back in time to see what she didn't really want to witness: the final moments as Geiner's storm-wreathed Lerche smashed fully into the lake . . . a high column of water, steam and flames violently rising. Signaling the end of Geiner's final flight.

* * * * *

Guided by reports from various air traffic sources, Tom managed to spot the landed Triebflugel on the western shore of Seneca Lake, just north of Himrod. From its position he could tell that the landing had been rough.

And Sandy hadn't responded to repeated calls. As rapidly as he could, he brought his atomicar down to a landing near the airplane.

As he climbed out, he could see someone who had been crawling away from the plane. Grabbing the medical kit, Tom began rushing towards the person as it slowly and awkwardly moved up to a standing position.

It was Sandy. Her clothes torn, her hair unkempt. Somehow . . . perhaps from the apparently difficult landing . . . she had managed to injure herself and was showing blood in several places. She was also limping very noticeably.

"Sandy!"

She didn't seem to hear or notice him. But, almost as he reached her, she suddenly swung about, unlimbering a machine gun which she'd been wearing on a shoulder strap. To Tom's surprise she aimed the gun at the Triebflugel and, pulling the trigger, emptied the entire clip of the weapon into the vehicle. The armor-piercing rounds were sufficient to smash through the skin of the plane and rupture vital parts, as well as penetrate the fuel tank. As Tom stood there, Sandy was briefly framed with a bright background of flame as, with a loud WHOOMF!, the machine was quickly enveloped in fire and smoke.

Tom was ready to go get the fire extinguisher from the atomicar, but he still stared at Sandy. "Wh-what? Why did you . . ."

"Damage control," Sandy muttered sourly, limping past her brother on her way to the atomicar.

Chapter Twenty-Six: Infiltration (Two Different Kinds).

A week later the waters of Lake Carlopa were settling down after an early morning storm. Only wind, some rain and the light touch of arctic air.

Sandy felt the touch and knew that soon she'd have to start thinking about the upcoming holidays. Thanksgiving and Christmas. A new year eventually. Winter was coming.

And other storms.

She continued limping along the wide trail which bordered a good part of the lake, still working to become accustomed to the crutch she was obliged to use in order to get around. Crashing the Triebflugel had, among other things, nearly broken her right patella. Sandy had initially thought she'd come through the landing reasonably well.

Come the following morning, however, and once the initial shock from the crash had worn off, Sandy was a bundle of aches, pains and bruises.

"So I take it the test flying is at an end for a while," Nospe remarked.

"Well, for that and for other reasons," Sandy replied.

Nospe raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

She nodded ruefully. "I yelled at Dad . . . and I'm too big to spank. Or so he says. But I'm barred from the flight line until further notice."

Nospe tried to hide his smile. In a few hours he and his wife would be boarding their plane back to Germany, and they were strolling with Sandy along the trail. "You are too much of an eagle to remain on the ground for very long," he gently pointed out. "Your father realizes that."

"And he loves you," Téa Nospe added. "It is the same with all parents. As you will someday learn for yourself."

"Yeah," Sandy tiredly agreed. "Not that there's gonna be too much flying to do for the moment anyhow." She paused, turning to look back towards Swift Enterprises, the Nospes copying her action. From their vantage point they could clearly make out the sight of various cranes scattered about the complex. Their ears could hear the sound of excavation and construction equipment in operation.

It was estimated that it would take months to fully repair all the damage which had been inflicted by Geiner's cyclone gun fleet. In the meantime, the nearby Swift Construction Company was assuming a re-emergence of its former prominence as it

worked to take on what it could. Other projects and efforts were being farmed out to various other Swift holdings. Sandy's father, in fact, was finishing up details which would see him and his immediate family moving to New Mexico to spend time working at the Swift's atomic energy research facility: the Citadel.

A break in tradition, Sandy considered. The first holiday season she could recall not spending in Shopton.

She then noticed Nospe's eyes regarding her evenly.

"You didn't invite Téa and I out here simply to watch you exercise," he said to her softly.

"Yeah," Sandy replied, turning back and once again walking. "There were things I wanted to talk about with you before you left."

"Should I leave?" Téa Nospe asked.

Sandy shook her head. "It's all right." Trying to maintain her balance she worked to collect her thoughts.

"You've been upset by something ever since this business ended," Nospe pointed out.

"Yes," Sandy said, somewhat more sharply than she intended to, and she winced at her own intensity.

Nospe moved closer alongside Sandy, his wife quietly coming up on the other side.

"Sandra---"

"I wanted him dead," Sandy said brokenly. She stopped and turned wide eyes up to Nospe's face. "I took that plane into the air, followed Geiner and maneuvered him into crashing. I actually wanted to kill Geiner."

The last had been delivered in almost an anxious sob, and she felt tears burning in her eyes.

For his part, Nospe calmly returned her stare.

"He had threatened you," he finally said. "Threatened people you loved. Damaged the things you cared about." His expression hardened slightly. "He threatened my wife."

"I know, I know---"

"From every indication, Geiner had become mentally unstable. Incapable of facing reason. And he was in possession of a devastating weapon. What you did was tragic---"

Sandy was shaking her head.

"---but perhaps it was the only way. Sandra!"

Sandy dropped her head, shaking it faster.

"Listen to me," Nospe insisted firmly. "Would you rather Geiner had killed you?"

"No, of course not---":

"Or do you feel you should've died with him?"

Sandy took a sharp, sudden breath, her face rising and her eyes looking all about at everything except Nospe. "I . . . I just don't want to depend upon killing as a way of solving problems."

"You're not a killer," Téa Nospe said.

Sandy looked at her as if for the first time. "Ykaterina Rotzog? Ithaca Foger? Geiner?"

"Their fates they brought upon themselves," she declared simply.

"I wish I shared your conviction," Sandy replied, turning away.

Reaching out with a hand, Nospe touched her shoulder, stopping her. "Sandra. It is harsh, yes. I agree that what you did was not easy. But you also need to look at what you've accomplished. The lives you've managed to save. There are many who owe you their gratitude for the actions you've taken. That number definitely includes both myself and Téa."

Sandy allowed one of her hands to come up and cover Nospe's.

"Your body will heal," Nospe assured her. "Please try and concentrate upon healing your soul as well."

Sandy let out a long, shuddering breath. "I'll try," she murmured. Gulping, she looked back up at the Nospes. "I plan to go with my folks and throw myself into helping out with the work at the Citadel while Enterprises is being fixed up."

Nospe smiled, patting her shoulder. "Good. That is starting to sound more like the Sandra I know and admire."

"Unfortunately, though, you're mistaken, Herr Nospe. You said this business was over. It isn't."

Nospe frowned. "Oh?"

Sandy nodded. "It's another reason I wanted to talk to you. This whole business isn't over. It hasn't been over since Ecuador."

Nospe's frown deepened.

"You're right. Geiner was mentally unstable. Unfortunately we'll never quite know the reason, but I'm willing to theorize that his reprogramming didn't entirely take."

"Reprogramming?"

Sandy was starting to feel tired. "Even Tom couldn't quite figure out how Geiner managed to develop something as sophisticated as the Cyclone Gun. And yes, I heard Geiner explain how the system was supposed to work. But there were still holes. Geiner was a brilliant spy, yes. But he wasn't an engineer.

"And Geiner mentioned how his `employers' . . . his `suppliers' . . . couldn't keep him fully equipped. That's why he had to make raids on warehouses. What sort of organization would have that kind of problem?"

"Sandra---"

"There's more. When I flew the cyclone plane I kept encountering this very sophisticated technology. Not only that, but I felt so comfortable piloting it. Almost as if I was meant to fly a cyclone plane." She nodded rapidly. "Yes, yes, I managed to wreck the plane while landing. But I still couldn't help but feel as if the plane was made especially for me. Or maybe it was the other way around."

A mixture of suspicion and mild fear slowly poured into Nospe's face.

"The kicker was something I saw at Geiner's base. A strip of paper from a EEG machine. I think Geiner had suspected there was something wrong with his mind. Maybe it had something to do with the way he was removed from prison. I don't know. But I saw the readings on the paper, and I'd seen them before. They were similar to the same sort of readings I've been producing ever since I came back from Ecuador." Sandy paused. "Ever since I came in contact with the alien artifact in your hydrodome."

"Mein Gott," Nospe breathed.

Sandy nodded. "There were handwritten notations on the EEG paper, Herr Nospe. The notations were in Space Friend language."

Téa Nospe's hands rose to cover her mouth.

Sandy had felt something rising inside her, and she now worked to try and remain in control of herself. Her eyes bored into Nospe's. "How close are you involved with Section Omphalos?" she asked.

He considered the question. "I . . . I'm still in contact with several of its members."

"Are there any of them you fully trust?"

Nospe nodded firmly. "Ja!"

"Get in touch with them as soon as you can," Sandy said. "Try and arrange as secret a meeting as possible. Take every precaution. Tell them what I've told you, and that there's every possibility Section Omphalos is being fully controlled by the Space Friends!"

* * * * *

Bingo looked up as Sandy limped into the office. "Sit Down!"

"Yes'm," Sandy said, moving to the couch and flopping down upon it.

Bingo watched her. "Well, I was gonna add 'please', but that'll do."

Sandy nodded, leaning back and allowing herself to relax.

"Mom may have to move a cot into Dad's office if she wants to see him again," Phyllis remarked, sweeping in through the door. "He's become so much a permanent fixture the maintenance people have started dusting him off at night."

Sandy managed to chuckle. "Aunt Helen's a survivor type. She'll manage."

"Oh she's not complaining too much," Phyllis replied. "She says it reminds her of the old days. She's thinking of brushing up on her secretarial skills so she can go back to sitting on his lap during working hours."

"Mmmmm." Sandy opened an eye. "So. Have you decided whether or not to remain here, or come with us down to New Mexico?"

Phyllis perched on a corner of Sandy's desk, considering the question. "Well . . . go ahead and accuse me of being selfish, but I want to hear where Tom decides to go."

"Only natural." Sandy tried to relax once more.

Then both her eyes snapped wide open and she looked around. "We seem to be missing a somewhat chubby shadow. Where's Mrs. Applepound?"

"Back to New York City for the Comic Con," Phyllis announced. "She's been invited to chair a panel: 'When Authors Mix With Reality'."

Sandy desperately tried to shake away the mental images flooding her head.

"And the good news is that she's doing a full rewrite of Sandra Swift And The Toenail Clippers Of Kali."

"Oh, whee."

"The bad news---"

Sandy raised a hand. "Stop! I'll read about it in the papers."

"Much sooner than that," Phyllis considered. "She told me she'd be sending you the rough draft when she pounds it out."

Sandy began softly moaning under her breath.

"'Good wine needs no bush'," Bingo solemnly intoned.

Both Sandy and Phyllis stared at her. "Come again?" Sandy asked.

"Shakespeare. As You Like It. The epilogue." Bingo stared owlishly at her friends. "Well, it's the best I could come up with, seeing as how this business is all over. And, with Mrs. A. gone, I felt we needed to keep up a proper literary rhythm."

"If it's proper literature we needed---" Sandy began, but suddenly stopped as Bud entered the office. "Oh! Hi!"

"Hi," he said, coming over and bending down to brush his lips lightly across the top of her head. "Was hoping I'd find you here," he said, straightening up and moving away.

Sandy's arms were still open and outstretched, and she slowly began lowering them.

Bud went to Sandy's desk. "Leaving you some numbers," he said. "I'll be heading to New Mexico tonight."

Sandy was staring at his back. "Tonight?"

"Yeah. Got to do some advance work for the big move to the Citadel. Tom is still trying to arrange something with the people in Everett involving the test flight schedule for the new Flying Lab, so your Dad's got me doing the initial runs down West."

At the mention of Tom's plans, Phyllis' expression became quietly calculating.

Sandy suddenly felt many years younger, and much more insecure. "I was sort of hoping to have some alone time with you."

"Yeah," Bud said, turning back and giving her a smile. "But it'll still be a month before we make the Big Move. Plenty of time for us, babe."

Phyllis and Bingo looked at each other, their eyes widening and both their mouths silently moving around the word "babe".

"I kind of . . . need you tonight," Sandy tried again in a small voice.

"Be back before you know it," Bud said, moving past her and out the door, letting one of his hands lightly pass across her cheek. "Call you when I get to the Citadel," his voice floated back.

Sandy sat back forlornly against the couch. Let out a breath. "Well!"

"Craazy arms that reach to hold somebody newwww'," Bingo began singing, until she saw Phyllis sharply drawing a finger across her throat.

"This is the pits," Sandy continued. "Whatever happened to the Heroine getting the Handsome Hero at the end of an adventure?"

"Welcome to my side of the street," Phyllis ruefully remarked, turning slightly to pick up the buzzing phone on Sandy's desk.

"I guess I can pretty much see how New Mexico's gonna go," Sandy concluded morosely, unaware of the adventures which would soon await her as part of SANDRA SWIFT AND THE ATOMIC PIRATES.

She then noticed the catlike smile Phyllis was giving her. "What?"

"That's the guard at the front gate," Phyllis said sweetly. "It seems there's a detective from the New York City Police Department wanting to conduct an interview with you."

"Oh?" Sandy's eyes widened a bit. "I thought I finished up all the details concerning New York and the police. Unless . . . Oh! Is it Harris?"

"Good question." Phyllis' smile widened. "The guard hasn't given me the name, but he did mention that, whoever it is, he's dressed very nicely and is carrying a dozen red roses."

Bingo's cheeks pinked. "Maybe it is Detective Link."

Sandy smiled slowly. "Let's find out."